THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

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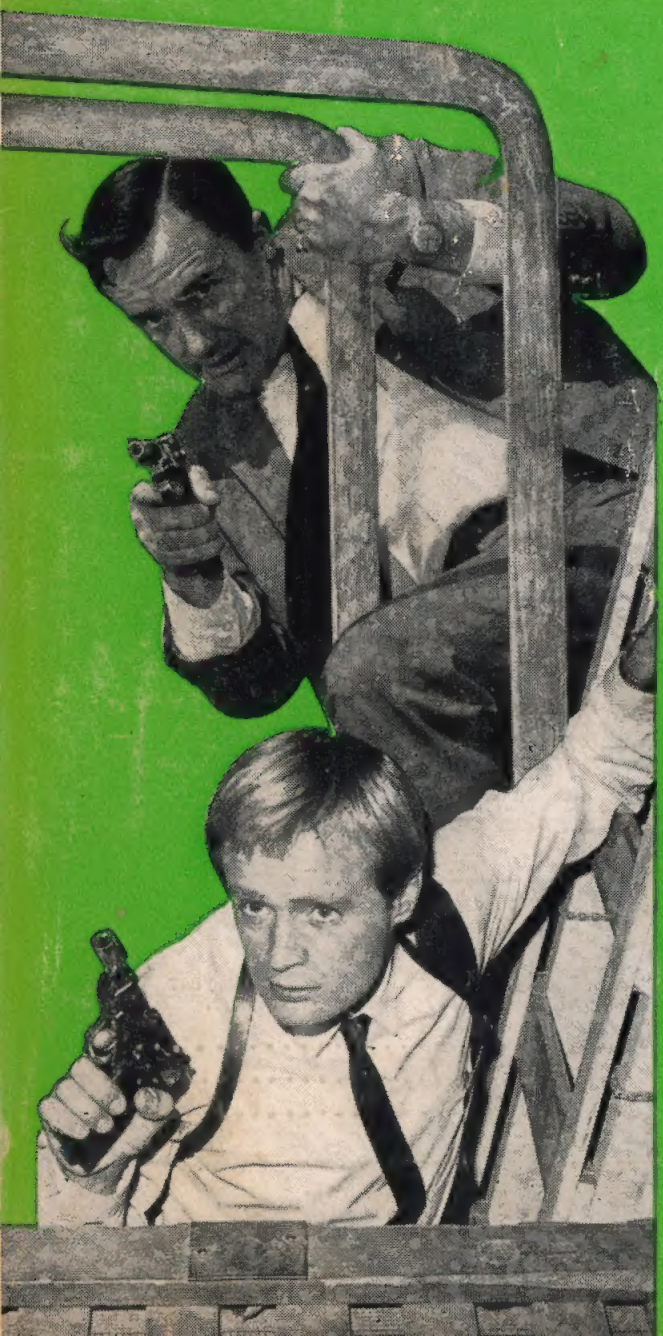

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ILLYA KURYAKIN

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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

OCTOBER, 1966 Vol. 2, No. 3

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE MOBY DICK AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Under the sea . . . in the air . . . somewhere, hidden and deadly, a crazed Thrush scientist held the key to unchain a horror which could destroy the world, as Illya and Solo, fighting against time and a remorse-less foe, seek to unlock the dread riddle of the man-made tidal wave, which, unchecked, can make all London a vast graveyard!

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THE MOBY DICK AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

In the sea . . . in the clouds . . . cunningly and well had THRUSH spawned their seeds of evil, as Napoleon and Illya combed panic-stricken London to find the key to the most satanic murder device ever to menace U.N.C.L.E.—a man-made tidal wave which could drown the world . . .

PROLOGUE

"—AND NOT A DROP TO DRINK"

THE ONLY color in all of the threatening gray world came spurting orange from the power pods on each wing of the jet seaplane. And the mood of Napoleon Solo exactly suited the somberness in which they were flying, at what seemed an irritatingly slow pace for so important a mission.

Solo's index and middle finger, right hand, smarted suddenly. The cigarette he'd been smoking had nearly burned down to the filter. Startled, he dropped it, shooting to his feet from the jump seat behind the co-pilot's in the cockpit.

The smoldering butt rolled forward toward the instruments.

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FEATURING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

Their pilot, Masters, a sallow Scot, spotted the little rolling cylinder.

"Put that thing out, for the Lord's sweet sake," he said. "Kuryakin? Some one!"

Solo rubbed his hand on the right leg of his flight suit. Seated just ahead of him in the co-pilot's chair, Illya Kuryakin slid his left boot over and used the ridged soles to extinguish the last wisp of smoke. Solo sucked his index finger.

"I know U.N.C.L.E.'s pilot squadron has high health standards," Illya said. "But don't you think you're carrying it a bit far, Masters?"

Masters swiped at his drooping mustache, muttered, "Extreme fire hazard. Special fuels and all."

"Oh," Illya said. "That explains it." His glance back over his shoulder at Napoleon Solo implied that it did not explain it.

Precisely the opposite.

Solo was angry with himself for allowing the minor burn to divert his attention, even momentarily, from the circular frosted display glass on the futuristic-looking forward wall of the cockpit. Though it was noon by the clock, they were flying through cloud. They had been since leaving the Shetland Islands behind, some twenty minutes ago. The cockpit was gloomy. Concentric yellow circles glowed on the display glass. Solo bent between the men in the twin front seats, alarmed.

He pointed. "Masters, I thought you were locked on. We've lost the blip."

Masters grunted, threw a couple of selector knobs.

"Gone, all right."

"Masters," Illya said, "don't be so casual. We must catch that THRUSH helicopter. It's imperative that we forestall Dr. Shelley's capture by the enemy."

Solo winced. "Always understating it. Shelley has already been captured. Kidnaped is the right term. Due, you'll recall, to the delay we encountered trying to get through London traffic, once the informant confessed."

"Thirty seconds," Illya said softly. "It can encompass a lifetime."

Solo said, "Listen, Masters, what do we do? We've lost them."

Masters snuffled. "Doing the best I can. Frankly, you chaps from Operations and Enforcement always expect miracles. We were lucky we had this craft available at London at all. We were lucky that the THRUSH helicopter which carried off this Shelley fellow apparently was only a transfer vehicle, otherwise we'd never even have caught the signal from British Air Defense that enabled us to pick them up."

"I wouldn't say we were expecting miracles, Masters." Solo felt testy. "I'd say we were expecting that a THRUSH jet helicopter could be caught by an U.N.C.L.E. jet seaplane which, unless I'm mistaken, is theoretically faster."

Ahead, past the windshield, tattery gray clouds whipped at them. The cockpit smelled of metal and fuel. The stink of tension rose in Solo's nostrils. Suddenly through the scud coming at them with express-train speed, a ragged swatch of dull gray-blue appeared. Solo craned forward. The power pods whistled and the seaplane burst from the low-hanging clouds.

Below them rolled the cold metallic waters of the North Sea, uniformly stretching to the horizons except at one point ahead and slightly to port. There, the outcrops of several small rocky islands pushed up through whitecaps. Over this cluster of islands a black dot hung and then slowly lowered.

Solo clapped Masters on the shoulder: "There they are. Landing. They must be expecting a pickup."

The U.N.C.L.E. agent was suddenly aware of Masters' response to the gloved slap of enthusiasm. Inside his flying suit, Masters had gone stiff.

His head jerked around sharply. Before he turned back forward to the controls, Solo saw sickly yellow reflections from the display glass shining in the man's watering eyes.

Solo decided that Masters disliked him. Unusual. Strictly the exception for an organization with the high morale U.N.C.L.E. enjoyed.

Or was he over-reacting? Solo wondered about it as the seaplane closed the distance to the rocky island. The stakes were extremely high—

They stood to make a double bag if they succeeded on this mission. One half of the catch was essential. That was the recovery of Dr. Artemus Shelley, the oceanographer who headed by U.N.C.L.E.'s special undersea warfare research station near Golder's Green.

The other half of the catch could be a bonus—Newsom Naglesmith. It was an unlikely enough name for a crack professional murderer. Naglesmith was a European subsector chief for THRUSH, with a long record of kills and assorted mayhem.

Word of a plot to kidnap Dr. Artemus Shelley had reached Solo and Illya in Edinburgh, where they were just winding up an affair which had found THRUSH pack-

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

aging toxic chemicals at a small multivitamin tablet factory. The vitamins were to be shipped to the post exchanges of key military bases maintained by several important nations.

The two agents had jetted back to London, conversing briefly with Mr. Waverly while airborne. Then at London HQ they had spent twenty naggingly slow minutes with the washed-up Wagnerian soprano who had been Newsom Naglesmith's latest light of love.

Several months ago, it seemed, Naglesmith had grown a whit careless while drinking vintage champagne. He'd babbled to her of the impending plot to ferret Dr. Shelley away.

A lover's quarrel just yesterday had resulted in the poor soprano being bounced out of Naglesmith's life forever. Tipsy with gin, the lady had reeled into a police station, incoherently wailing about the plot, and about dear Newsom being wrought up because of his impending "situation," as he referred to acts of violence on behalf of THRUSH.

Naglesmith's name was relayed to C.I.D., thence to U.N.C.L.E. While the lady was still under sedative, resident agents plied her with other effective but basically harmless drugs, thereby draining her psyche of a few concrete details about the planned Shelley kidnap.

Deduction from the details: Naglesmith was wrought up because the time for an important "situation" had arrived, and it stood a good chance of being the Dr. Shelley lift. Solo and Illya were signaled on an emergency call and got into the London traffic jam after leaving HQ.

They arrived at the laboratory just in time to see the THRUSH transfer copter winging away. With the aid of the British Air Force, they'd picked up the trail at sea an hour later, Masters their pilot.

Illya Kuryakin was thumbing through his little book. Solo's nerves were stretched to the limit. They were closing on the rocky islands, each outcrop of stone assuming definition in the sea. Masters had both flight gloves on the control levers. Abruptly Solo reached past him.

"What the devil are you doing, Solo?"

Flick, flick, Solo twisted red levers.

"Your job. Getting the anti-personnel rockets ready. We don't know what kind of reinforcements THRUSH has on those islands."

"Their 'copter is out of sight now," Illya said. Solo hadn't even seen him glance up.

Masters licked his lips. Sweat popped on his brow. A drop rolled down and sat on the tip of his nose.

"Shouldn't we radio for help?" he asked.

Solo couldn't help himself: "What do you use for backbone, Masters? Jello?"

The yellow dash-glare shone again in Masters' eyes. "That wasn't a prudent thing to say."

Illya snapped his small book shut. "Not prudent, perhaps. But precisely right. Napoleon, the behavior of Mr. Masters on this flight can be described by only one word. Reluctant."

Suddenly Illya's hand went out of sight. When it re-appeared, the fingers were dwarfed by the massive blackness of the long-muzzle U.N.C.L.E. pistol.

"This seaplane is not underpowered, Mr. Masters," he said. "It is you who are underpowered. You lack ambition to catch THRUSH at its dirty work. I suggest you take the controls, Napoleon. Mr. Masters was fearful of your cigarette. He pleaded exotic fuels aboard.

"I always carry my little pamphlet on U.N.C.L.E. operating equipment. I was leafing through it just now. This type of plane operates on standard fuel. We are quite explosion-proof here in the cockpit. Unless, of course—" Illya Kuryakin jabbed the muzzle nearer Masters' face—"there is some other explosion hazard we don't know about."

All at once Masters seemed to acquire character. He threw his head back and laughed.

"Get out of there, you miserable traitor," Solo shouted. He grabbed the fur collar of Masters' flying suit.

Masters clubbed at him hard. Napoleon Solo took a blow on the temple. He went crashing back against instrument dials on the rear cockpit wall.

With his left hand Masters reached beneath his seat and gave a twist.

"There! Now I've armed the little darling—" He batted savagely at Illya's pistol with his fist.

Illya's right hand was driven up. The pistol blammed. A big ragged hole appeared in the cockpit roof. Wind screamed.

From somewhere Masters produced a heavy spanner. He cracked Illya across the bridge of the nose with it. Then, face contorted with fanatic fury, he twisted up out of his bucket seat. His leg accidentally kicked one of the control levers. The seaplane's nose jerked up into a steep climb.

Wind whipped and tore at Solo's face as he fought for balance. The plane's upward tilt threw Masters at him, hacking air with the spanner. Solo ducked and darted between Masters' legs as the pilot's hard blow connected.

Had it connected with Solo's skull, that would have been all. As it was, Masters had swung violently and the spanner head crashed through the tin outer metal shell of the instrument panel on the rear wall.

Glass shattered. Ripped wires spurted green sparks. The spanner in Masters' hand became a conductor of powerful currents. The flight

glove was of little help as insulation. Masters' backbone arched. He shrieked, trying to stand taller than he was as electricity shot through his body.

Then he dropped, crisped.

Smoke swirled in the cockpit now. Solo crawled groggily into the pilot's seat. Sparks hit him on the back of the neck, burning his skin. He thought he heard ticking but that was impossible. The wind was screaming through the shot-out cockpit roof too loudly.

Had the roof control tracks been damaged? If they had, he and Illya, who was muzzily shaking his head, would be marmalade or worse as soon as he tripped the lever—

"Hang on," Solo yelled. "I'm going to blow the ejector."

"I preferred Edinburgh," Illya yelled back. "Irish lasses, Irish whiskey—"

Solo hammered the ejection lever and knew a moment of exquisite horror. Nothing happened.

But his own senses had stretched a split second into an eternity. There was a thunder, a sense of lifting, of shooting straight at the cockpit roof.

Good-bye, skull, Solo thought. Then he was rocketing up into gray-blue sky.

He shot up and up like a projectile. The remains of the ejection seat dropped away beneath. A ferocious blam hurt his ears and sent black smoke-balls writhing across his vision. The seaplane had gone up.

Solo began to drop. The horizon spun over and over. Finally, when he was dropping like a stone and thought he had the sea and sky in their proper places, he yanked the ring. With a crack and a tear at his armpits, the chute opened.

He twisted his head. Silk bloomed several hundred yards above and to his right. Illya bobbed like a doll at the end of his shrouds. He kicked a boot to indicate he was all right.

On the way down Solo had only a swift glimpse of the nearest island. The THRUSH jet 'copter had landed on its far side. In all the island was not more than several hundred yards across, but it was bisected by an uneven ridge. Atop this ridge two tiny figures stood silhouetted now. They were out of pistol or rifle range. That was both a blessing and a burden. Time might be short.

With a huge splash, Solo settled into the icy sea. He struggled and snorted and flicked the inflating switches on the legs of his suit. Soon he paddled out from under the soggy silk of his chute. From the neck down he resembled the circus fat lady.

An equally bulbous shape with Illya's head on top floated a dozen yards off. Solo paddled toward it. Illya squirted a spout of water out of his mouth.

"I saw two of them," Solo

panted, indicating the island. "One might have been Shelley."

"Two against two isn't bad," Illya said. "Of course they've seen us too."

Squinting into the light haze which lay on the surface of the sea, Napoleon Solo nodded.

Neither of the U.N.C.L.E. agents needed more words with the other. They'd worked long as a team, knew what must be done, appreciated the perilous shortness of time just now. Naglesmith might have arranged his pickup on a split-second schedule. A nuclear-powered THRUSH powerboat could appear on the horizon and reach the island before Solo and Illya succeeded in swimming halfway there.

Shock and pain had already conspired to put a weight of fatigue on Napoleon Solo. He tried to forget it all. He deflated his suit to the proper level to give his stroke maximum efficiency. Then, icy water slashing at his head, he began to swim.

He drew within fifty feet of the island's rough beach. He heard a flat report. A geyser of water leaped up inches from his head. From atop the ridge, Newsom Naglesmith had found the range.

Solo poured on the speed. Another gunshot. This time the echo said the shot was directed at Illya, approaching the island's far side. Solo swam like a madman, filling and emptying his lungs with savage force.

Naglesmith fired in his direction again. The bullet ripped a slash in his left sleeve. Solo's knees crunched gravel.

He staggered up the rocky beach and floundered out flat behind a big boulder, a portion of which was chipped away by Naglesmith's next bullet. A flying bit of stone nicked his right eyeball, bringing intense pain and momentary blindness.

Hastily unzipping his right suit leg, Solo took out his own long-muzzle pistol. He snapped a range extender over the end to make it even longer. Then he dragged himself upright.

He peered from behind the rock. Up above him the ridge was jag-

gedly cruel as a dinosaur's spine. And empty.

Carefully Solo dodged forward to the cover of the next rock nearest the ridge base. Suddenly Naglesmith loomed into sight in a bright scarlet windproof with parka hood. His face was ugly with delight as he aimed and fired.

Solo dove and rolled frantically. The bullet ate away part of the shale where he'd stood an instant before.

Something crashed softly against the ridge rock near Naglesmith. A rock thrown by Illya Kuryakin? The THRUSH sub-sector chief twisted around and fired his pistol three times. Solo got to his feet and scrabbled wildly up the sloping side of the ridge. He could hear Illya's boots pounding from the other direction, though he could not see him.

Naglesmith let out a shrill cry of rage. His foot must have slipped. He landed on his chest, his face sticking out over the ridge edge, not six feet above the place where Solo was clinging.

Naglesmith's muddy eyes lighted with killing hunger. Solo was caught in the open, absolutely unprotected as he hung on the slope of the ridge. Naglesmith jerked his right hand forward. He aimed his automatic pistol down at Solo's damp forehead.

Solo whipped his own gun-hand up to beat Naglesmith if he could. But the swim had left his palm slippery. The pistol wriggled, slid against his skin. The muzzle dipped. The aim was disastrously wrong—

Naglesmith leaned down.

His trigger finger turned white.

Something cracked. Naglesmith exhaled, a long, startled, "Ahhhhh!" He flopped over on his back.

Solo fought for purchase on the rocky slope. Cautiously he edged upward and looked over the lip of the ridge.

In the distance the black-painted THRUSH jet 'copter stood silent in an open, relatively rock-free area. Nearer, a thin, altogether innocuous sandy-haired man of fifty or so huddled with his hands in the pockets of a raincoat two sizes too large. And just a few feet away, Illya Kuryakin slipped out from behind a large boulder.

In his hand he held his small auxiliary close-range weapon. The zipper on his left suit leg was open; he'd gotten it out of there. He'd lost his regular pistol in the plane.

Illya stared down, his face devoid of expression, his bangs a damp dark line across his forehead. Newsom Naglesmith lay with one arm crooked under his face. His back showed a darkish widening stain where Illya's bullet had pierced the scarlet windproof fabric directly below the left shoulder blade.

"Stop mumbling," Solo said. "And thanks for the assist."

"You're welcome. And I'm not mumbling."

Solo jumped forward then, using his boot toe to lift Naglesmith's chest and flip him over.

The THRUSH agent groaned. His teeth were clenched. His face was formed into a hideous, glare-eyed expression of pleasure. And Napoleon Solo saw that a false face on Naglesmith's watch stood upright at a 90 degree angle from the real face, which incorporated a small transmitter unit of familiar design.

Solo bent, tore the bogus wristwatch off Naglesmith's arm. Illya raced up.

"How long has he been talking on that thing, Napoleon?"

"Long—quite long—enough," Naglesmith said. His puffy face convulsed into what could only be called black humor. A dying man's humor. His eyes seemed to grow very large. "Quite long enough to signal—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen—*look!*"

The reedy voice belonged to Dr. Artemus Shelley. He was flapping his arms and pointing wildly off the coast of the island. Solo turned.

An ominous rumbling filled the air. Both Solo and Illya gaped in horror.

A gigantic wall of foaming water had risen in the space of three heartbeats, from the surface of the ocean.

Solo couldn't believe the evidence of his eyes. The monstrous tidal wave reached higher, higher, cresting up and up with every passing second, flying at the tiny island with incredible speed.

Out of *nowhere* it had come. And now it foamed and thundered straight at them, twice as wide as the rocky little island and four times as high.

It seethed, it roared like thunder, it crashed—

And over it all sounded Naglesmith's hysterical laughing.

ACT I

WHITE WHALES AND PINK POISON

NAPOLEON SOLO was not a man to expend effort on ceremony. He did not bother to inquire whether Thrushman Naglesmith wished to be evacuated. A dousing spray from the tidal wave was already trickling down his neck as he signaled Illya with a quick nod. Illya at the head, Solo at the feet, the U.N.C.L.E. agents bent to lift their prisoner.

Beneath their boots the little island quaked. Over his shoulder Solo glimpsed the mountainous gray water-wall rising and rising. When it finally splashed over upon them, it would do so with a billion-ton force. Nothing would be left. Solo grabbed the ankles of Naglesmith's boots.

For his pains he got a vicious kick under the point of his chin. Though wounded critically or fa-

tally, Naglesmith had strength left. He cracked Illya Kuryakin's cheek with a flailing elbow and began to scrabble away.

"You worthless fool!" Illya shouted. "Unless we get you into that 'copter, you're finished."

The words could barely be heard above the grinding, rumbling sea roar. Naglesmith kept crawling away from them. Solo saw the man's danger, pointed. He flapped his arms, ran forward shouting. The sea-thunder drowned him out.

Naglesmith's cheeks blanched; all at once as he realized there was nothing in back of him. With a squeal of fright he half skidded, half fell into a narrow crevass. When Solo and Illya reached him his whole body below his rib cage was wedged tightly underground.

They grabbed his arms. They tugged, swore. Water pelted them in heavy sheets. Naglesmith's face had acquired a wild look. Sea water streamed over his cheeks. He knew he couldn't be pulled free. Somehow he didn't seem to care.

Solo glanced uneasily back. His belly churned at the sight of the fantastic tidal wave nearing the island. Dr. Artemus Shelley was running back and forth next to the THRUSH 'copter, obviously terrified that they wouldn't escape.

"We have to leave him," Solo mouthed the words. Illya, drenched, nodded.

"Go on, go on!" Naglesmith yelled, with such maniacal lung-power that the U.N.C.L.E. agents could hear something of what he was screaming. "Go on, run, yellow-bellies. Run while you can. THRUSH has the secret. We'll squeeze the world's throat and the world will surrender! Go on, you ridiculous cretins; save yourselves for a few more days. But beware Project Ahab."

Naglesmith was shrieking in the mindless abandon of a man doomed. *"Beware Project Ahab, you—"* He howled foul, hateful names.

Napoleon Solo had as few scruples about the enemy as the next U.N.C.L.E. operative. Perhaps fewer. Yet he still rebelled at the idea of leaving a human being to die. Illya dragged his arm, signaling some trouble more immediate than the tidal wave. Solo spun around.

Dr. Artemus Shelley lay sprawled on the rock below the open hatch of the THUSH 'copter, unmoving.

Dr. Shelley had apparently been trying to climb into the machine. Damp footprints showed around the hatch edges. Solo raced for the 'copter, mind made up. In all the graying darkness of the nightmare, one blob of color leaped out, a bright crimson smear on the fallen man's forehead. Dr. Shelley had struck his temple on a sharp stone.

"Can you fly this thing?" Solo

bawled as he and Illya fought the battering wind.

"If there is the usual simplified THRUSH manual on board."

"That's what I like," Solo yelled. "Confidence."

"—beware, beware," came the gibbering voice of Naglesmith, shredded into snatches by the roar of wind and water. "—beware the white whale, you despicable, crawling sons of—" More verbal filth, mercifully blown away by the noise.

Solo and Illya picked up Dr. Shelley, lifted him inside the 'copter hatch as swiftly and gingerly as possible. Solo gave Illya a boost, then leaped up himself. He slammed the hatch and dogged it down just as the first down-pourings of the cresting tidal wave struck the island.

"All burners active," Illya called from the cockpit. "Now if we can only get lift—"

The 'copter's roof sounded as though a ton of pebbles rained on it. Counterpointing this came the thin whine of the turbines. Solo crouched on the damp ribbed floor beside the lightly-breathing Dr. Shelley. He felt the 'copter shudder, strain as more and more water poured down, a torrent of water, a thunder of water that hammered his ears pitilessly. Suddenly, there was lift.

"We're up," Illya called from in front. "Up, but not out."

Nothing could be seen through the cockpit glass except streaming torrents of gray-green water. The 'copter began to lurch and pitch. Illya fought the controls. Using his knees, Solo tried to brace Shelley's body against one wall to prevent additional serious injury. The wound on Shelley's temple had slowed its flow. But a dark, sinister bruise was forming.

Illya Kuryakin was wrenching the control rods and levers back and forth, adjusting the pitch every second as the rotors sought to lift the craft up and away from the torrent.

The jet 'copter shuddered another time. Metal whanged. Insulated cables broke loose from the wall, lashed wildly. Solo was thinking up a prayer. He figured it would need to be brief if he was to get it all in. The 'copter gave one last awful buck and pitch, then went zooming upward with a speed that almost dislocated Napoleon Solo's stomach.

Panting, Solo crawled into the cockpit seat beside Illya. The jet 'copter was lifting smoothly into the slate, blue sky. They had pulled up through the worst. Solo ran his moist tongue over strangely parched lips.

Illya banked the 'copter. Out the window to port Solo saw an awful sight. There was a boiling cauldron of white water where the tidal wave had collapsed upon itself, a foaming area of churning fury nearly a mile wide. Nothing of the rocky is-

land, nor any of its nearby companion islands remained.

"Such tidal waves are an oceanographic impossibility," Illya breathed, as if to convince himself of the truth of those words.

"That's nice," Solo said. "I'm really asleep in the hotel in London, having nightmares?"

"Let us sincerely hope that's it, Napoleon. Otherwise THRUSH has scored a march. Tidal waves do not simply generate themselves spontaneously, in seconds."

Solo tried to push the gnawing fact out of his mind. From where had the wave come? Naglesmith had given some sort of signal. But to what? To whom?

"Shelley's seriously injured," Solo said, jarred back to matters of the moment. "Try to cram more speed into those chopper blades. We'll land on the seacoast and radio for a paramedical squad to meet us." He felt exhausted, thick-witted. Dr. Shelley hardly stirred on the wet cabin floor.

As Illya piloted the 'copter away from the maelstrom, Solo watched it drop behind. He licked his lips again. His expression grew stark as he gazed out over the ocean at the devastation still bubbling whitely back there. Cold sweat slicked his face.

Illya glanced over. "What are you thinking, Napoleon?"

In a croak, all Solo could manage to reply was, "Well, actually—I'm thirsty."

TWO

BEWARE THE white whale?" said Mr. Alexander Waverly.

"That's what the man said," replied Napoleon Solo.

A raised eyebrow from Mr. Waverly. "Project Ahab?"

Up went Solo's right hand, Scout-honor sign. "Illya heard it too."

Illya Kuryakin had his slippered feet up on an ottoman before the fire in the grate. Both he and Solo, twenty-four hours after their encounter with the bizarre tidal wave, looked somewhat gritty around the eyes but otherwise not much worse for the experience. Their scars were mostly on the inside.

The paramedical plane had flown Dr. Shelley and the two agents swiftly to London. U.N.C.L.E.'s oceanography expert was now in a London hospital, the victim of a severe concussion. He had fallen into a coma. Both agents had managed to catch about an hour's sleep apiece before the arrival of Mr. Waverly, via transatlantic jet, in response to their signal to New York that something large-scale and fishy was up.

Pondering, Mr. Waverly strolled to the window. He tapped his empty pipe against the sill. Outside, though it was midafternoon, fog lamps gleamed on the Thames Embankment. Chimes rang somewhere.

This conference room, a part of

the U.N.C.L.E. London complex, was decorated in Victorian style. The only jarring note was the recessed bank of signal lights in the ceiling. Things were quiet. Only two lights flashed, one a standard blue showed that all security circuits surrounding the building's perimeter were operating correctly, and another, an intermittent orange flash, indicated cable traffic coming in from overseas.

"I don't know what to make of it." Mr. Waverly sighed. "I'd say it calls for an answer from a student of literature, or a psychiatrist, or both. Obviously, gentlemen, Naglesmith must have become mentally unstable when he realized he would die on the island."

"That's the easiest explanation." Illya did not sound convinced.

"Unfortunately it also is too simple for us to enjoy the luxury of adopting it," Waverly replied.

"Besides," Solo said, "we saw the evidence. Felt it. That tidal wave."

"A double hallucination is out of the question," Illya said.

"Um, quite right, quite right." Mr. Waverly sucked noisily at the cold briar. "Unfortunately we are faced with a dilemma. THRUSH may have succeeded in harnessing the tremendous destructive energy of the sea. But we are balked just there. We cannot question the one witness who might put us onto the right route of inquiry. Dr. Artemus Shelley's condition is not terminal. On the other hand, the physicians aren't certain just exactly how soon he'll come out of the coma."

Waverly consulted a gleaming gold wristwatch. "Perhaps I might check again, though—"

As the chief of one of the five sections of U.N.C.L.E.'s top level Policy and Operations division, Mr. Waverly showed his burdens in the slope of his shoulders and the pouches beneath his eyes. But he bore the burdens with dignity. As he walked across the carpet, he might have been starting out to pick up the phone to call his tailor.

Flopped into a huge and supremely comfortable easy chair which ministered to his assorted aches very nicely, Solo peered through two fingers of his left hand, which was propped under his chin. He'd had to run out and buy a topcoat for the trip to the airport to meet Waverly. He kept recalling the saucy little girl who had waited on him. The girl had a pert, fetching figure, a charming Cockney accent, and an easy to recall phone number.

Too bad.

There was an air of tension in the room, born of frustration. Illya sat up. "Beg your pardon, sir, but Napoleon and I still don't know exactly what role Dr. Shelley plays in all this. What does he really do for us?"

Waverly turned. "Didn't I cover that? Forgive me. My mind's been a lot overworked in this affair."

"We didn't see illusions," said

Solo. "That was certified water. A mountain."

Waverly said, "Project Ahab. It of course refers to Melville's magnificent book about the white whale, *Moby Dick*. Captain Ahab was the whaling vessel's maniacal captain dedicated to the whale's pursuit. Now the only context into which I can put the words Project Ahab is one which includes—no, no, it won't do. We had a report two and a half years ago that he went down in a THRUSH weapons bathysphere off Rio."

Memory surged back to Solo then. "Of course. Commander Victor Ahab."

"The THRUSH naval strategist," Illya said. "But wasn't he—well, crazy?"

Waverly gave an emphatic nod. "Mad as a coot. Like his novelistic counterpart. Never ran up against him personally. Our lads said he was a deadly adversary. Lunatics often are, as we know."

Waverly went on:

"There have been instances when THRUSH tagged one of its top people for a long range project, then staged an ersatz death or disappearance to allow the person to operate at maximum efficiency behind the fiction of being dead. We might be confronted with such a situation here. Of course we're still stuck on the thorn of what the devil THRUSH and Victor Ahab, if it is Victor Ahab, are up to."

"I need a drink," Solo announced. He pulled a bell rope. Soon an operative entered.

The man was the soul of politeness, a dignified gentleman of middle years dressed in butler's swallowtail. The triangular U.N.C.L.E. badge hung from his front pocket.

Napoleon Solo poured himself a jot of brandy from the decanter the man set down. Waverly was staring thoughtfully at a Gainsborough above the mantle.

Illya Kuryakin coughed. "The matter of Dr. Shelley, sir. What he does for U.N.C.L.E. Perhaps it would contain a clue—"

"Oh—sorry." Mr. Waverly refocused his attention. "Dr. Shelley. Afraid I can't be of much help there. I've seen descriptions of his work in his budget requests, but I'm not the technical type. Some-

thing to do with research into currents and tides around the world.

"I gather his research is basic rather than applied. Long term yields and all that, rather than some sort of sensational new diving suit we could use in our daily work. Frankly, Dr. Shelley would be our best authority if he were conscious. I'm regretful that we may have slipped up here, gentlemen, because evidently THRUSH holds Dr. Shelley and his work in higher regard than some of us at U.N.C.L.E. did."

Mr. Waverly picked up the receiver. Solo fidgeted in his chair. The memory of the tidal wave bothered him with what it might signify in the way of a THRUSH breakthrough.

Mr. Waverly murmured and clucked into the mouthpiece. Finally he hung up. The room had filled with the gloom of late afternoon. Yellow lamps shown like phantom eyes on the Embankment. A log fell on the fire, suffusing the room with a woody fragrance.

"We're in luck, gentlemen," Waverly announced. "Dr. Shelley is not entirely out of danger, but when I stressed the urgency of the situation, the doctors agreed that they might be able to rouse him for a few moments, no more. At least they are going to give it a try. Shall we go?"

Napoleon Solo smoothed his dark suit as he stood up. "Right now, sir?"

"Of course, right now, Mr. Solo. Have you another engagement?"

"He was just thinking about buying another topcoat," Illya grinned.

"Chasing salesgirls again, eh, Mr. Solo? Well, some of them are quite sophisticated these days, I will admit." Mr. Waverly took down a Homburg from a rack. "Try to check your romantic instincts. There are bigger catches afloat. White whales."

Solo sighed as he followed his chief out the door. "Call me Ishmael."

THREE

UNDER THE thinnest of transparent polyethylene tenting, Dr. Artemus Shelley looked like a person embalmed.

He wore a white hospital gown. His cheeks were parchment color. The heavily guarded room in St. Bride's Hospital of the Templars was filled with ominous sounds and shadows. Life-giving oxygen hissed into the tent under which Shelley lay breathing thinly. Small hooded lights shone around the baseboards, the only illumination except for a thin white pencil beam slicing down next to the bed, onto a gunmetal box with a console of dials on top.

This special sound system, carefully inserted into the tent and manned by an earphoned U.N.C.L.E. technician, was designed to make communication with Shelley as clear as possible un-

der the circumstances. Three doctors, gowned and masked, hovered on the bed's far side. Behind them were oxygen tanks, a network of feeder tubes running to the tent. Solo, Illya and Waverly were grouped behind the technician on this side. The gas hissed.

"Ready, sir," said the technician. He flipped a console toggle. From a speaker grid in the set came the amplified rasp of Shelley's feeble breathing.

Mr. Waverly cleared his throat behind his glove. "Thank you, Mr. Jacks." He put a small, rod-like microphone near his lips and spoke softly:

"Doctor? Doctor Shelley, this is Alexander Waverly. Policy and Operations. Simply nod if you hear me."

The pale face beneath the tenting stirred almost imperceptibly.

"Dr. Shelley," Waverly went on, "I do not want to tax you, but it's imperative that we learn whatever we can about the motives behind your kidnaping. Can you tell us anything about what you've been doing at your lab in Golder's Green? Just a word, Shelley, a word or two—where your secret files are kept? That would be enough."

Solo's nerves grated at the sudden increased rasping from the amplifier. Dr. Shelley's veined hand twitched on the white sheet covering his chest. Instantly one of the masked doctors bent to scan dials near the oxygen tanks. There was silence.

"Please, Dr. Shelley, try," Mr. Waverly whispered.

One of the doctors said, "We can't allow this for more than another minute, sir."

"Tides. Change—tides. Been studying the various—" Dr. Shelley coughed hard.

"Yes, yes, studying what?" Mr. Waverly persisted. "Tell us where to locate the records."

Abruptly Dr. Shelley seemed to start up. His eyes opened half way and into the room where the gas hissed came the harsh, grating amplified words: "Reports—eyewitness reports.—Saw the white whale —*saw the white*—"

Furiously, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin spun toward the hospital room door.

A physician clad in a green nylon jumper, mask and cap had just entered, somewhat noisily. Every head turned. With a sigh Dr. Shelley folded back down onto the pillows. Outside in the corridor, several other attendants in masks were hovering.

"Sorry, chaps," murmured the new arrival. "Time for a new tank."

"He's gone under," Mr. Waverly said, eyeing the tent. "We'll have to wait a bit."

"I heard him say something about eye-witness reports of a white whale," Illya said.

Mr. Waverly took out his pipe and began fiddling with it. "Yes, he

did, didn't he? For a moment there, I thought I might be mad. I can make no sense of it at all. Yet I'm sure it's very sensible in the grimmest sort of way. And we don't know. We just don't know."

In the act of ticking his pipe stem angrily against the electronic console, Mr. Waverly glanced at Solo. "Mr. Solo! Kindly get your mind off shopgirls!" He sounded tired.

"I'm not thinking about shopgirls, sir. I'm thinking that's an unusual looking nozzle at the top of that oxygen tank."

The hospital attentant heard Solo's remark. He stepped to one side, effectively blocking Solo's view of the other two attendants, who had wheeled the tank in on a rubber-tired hand cart. They were now shifting the tank gingerly onto the floor. Things, Solo felt, were happening too fast.

The tank handlers had the cylinder nearly off the cart. The first attendant was still blocking it from view. Solo walked quickly around the end of the bed. He caught a glimpse of the tank's top.

Instead of the conventional solid cap on the cylinder's tip this one seemed to be perforated metal. Perforated in a dozen or more spots—

Solo had been warned by less conspicuous things in the past. His hand whipped underneath his jacket.

His fingers closed around his pistol-butt. "I think we've gotten a delivery of the wrong kind of gas—*Illya!*" He called it out sharply and dragged his pistol free.

The two attendants handling the cart gave it a jerk. The cylinder tipped. The first attendant jumped to catch it. He pressed the cylinder's wall. A small panel sprang open. The man reached in, twisted a lever. Pinkish colored gas that smelled of cinnamon began to spray from the nozzle-holes in the cap.

All this took barely seconds. At the same time the cart handlers whipped the cart around, gave it a shove at Solo and let go.

The heavy metal caught him in the shins, knocking him off balance. Solo had to wrench and twist hard to keep from falling against the bed. Other men in green jumpers and masks clogged the doorway. The three regular physicians stumbled over themselves in confusion.

"A THRUSH infiltration team, Mr. Waverly," Illya barked. "Get down!"

One of the attendants by the tank had drawn a gun. Twisting and still off balance, Napoleon Solo got a shot away. It made a flat, popping sound. The man jerked up on his heels and fell forward, his face passing through the cloud of

pinkish gas beginning to envelop that side of the room.

As soon as the man got a substantial whiff of the stuff, his cheeks began to blacken. He slammed down on the floor, dead.

The trio of regular doctors had crouched down behind the bed. Three more green-jumpered killers were in the room, making a total of five Thrushmen on the scene. Every one had a pistol out.

Illya Kuryakin rolled prone under the bed, and fired at a pair of legs against the far wall. Another Thrushman went down.

Mr. Waverly had sought cover behind a heavy metal bureau. The pinkish gas was spreading rapidly. Solo was already a trifle dizzy. He dodged back away from it. The cinnamon tang was tantalizingly, seductively pleasant. Another of the THRUSH killers craned around the end of the bed. Aiming, he accidentally inhaled a draught of the pink cloud.

The man's eyes bulged. His tongue shot out as though it were on a spring.

His cheeks darkened and he sprawled and died.

Napoleon Solo was aware of his vulnerability in trying to crouch and fire in the open. His only advantage was the dimness of the room. A THRUSH man by the door shot at him. The bullet bit a hole in the metal bed post near Solo's head. On one knee Solo squeezed his trigger. Hit, the THRUSH agent went spilling backwards into the hall, knocking over his companion.

As the second man struggled to fight his way out from underneath the corpse, Illya darted over to the door. He shot the floundering man three times.

In the corridor alarm bells bonged. Footsteps slapped. A nurse shrieked, suddenly. It was a nightmare fight, the pistols popping with a ghastly softness. Solo peered up over the end of the bed, through the tenting. Something glittered on the other side—glittered and came flashing and slashing down at the thin polyethylene guarding Shelley's life.

Solo flung himself forward on his belly. He skidded past the end of the bed, rolled on his right side and fired to his left all in one swift moment.

He missed.

The first attendant, mask fallen off to reveal a florid Middle European face, had the knife. He meant to slash the tent so that the pinkish gas could creep in. The gas was settling. Solo only had a foot or two of air space in which to breathe as he got off his second shot.

The attendant's skin was blackening from the neck upward. But he was frantically determined to score with the blade. Solo's shot spun him halfway around.

Still the man's knife arm refused to go limp. The shining tip of the weapon flirted toward the polyethelene, driven by a spasm of the dy-

ing man's will. Through the pinkish gas Solo aimed at the bridge of the man's nose and pulled the trigger.

The knife tip was less than an inch from the plastic shroud as the bullet drove up into the THRUSH assassin's skull and drove him back against the wall.

Two of the doctors had stumbled to their feet. Mr. Waverly was shouting, "Get Shelley out of here at once!"

"It's too risky to lift him," one of the doctors exclaimed.

"Clear the hall out there!" Solo yelled, gesturing. He had a football-shaped pellet in his hand. He flung it at the corridor wall, ducked.

There was a shattering rap of sound, a burst of fire and more smoke, this time whitish. But half the corridor wall had dissolved into a mess of lath and plaster. There was now an opening large enough to roll Dr. Shelley's entire bed through.

With Illya and Mr. Waverly and Solo and the doctors all working at it, they got the bed out and rolling along the corridor to the elevator. By that time virtually half the hospital staff had arrived.

Solo shook his head to clear it. Then he and Illya began issuing rapid orders.

Because the pinkish gas travelled slowly, they were able to evacuate the entire floor successfully. Patients were wheeled or helped into the huge elevators. Then the fire doors at either end were sealed. Dr. Artemus Shelley was still alive and apparently had been done no further injury, according to the doctors who checked him over on the next floor below.

The U.N.C.L.E. chemical counteraction squad summoned by Mr. Waverly slipped up the fire stairs like so many glass-faced, asbestos-suited ghosts, to damp the cylinder of lethal gas.

FOUR

THE NAME of the club was The Rocker Shop, though there were no patrons present who could classify as rockers by virtue of leather apparel, hostile sneers, or tire chains at the ready.

An executive at London HQ had recommended it as an excellent place for a mixed grille and a few ales, if you could stand the floor show. This consisted of an unending sequence of music hall turns. The acts appeared on a tiny stage.

A brittle flow of Establishment talk clipped back and forth in the air over the tiny tables. The only illumination in the smoky hole came from a few weak bar lights, from the baby spots aimed at the stage, and from electric candles inside tinny holders on each table. Napoleon Solo forgot to applaud as a juggler gave way to a howling, electrified teenage musical group.

A sign at the side of the stage announced the group as The Costermongers. None of the well-

groomed, upper-class guests paid much attention. Solo downed some more ale, then pushed aside the remains of his mixed grille. He eyed the crowd.

"Solo in Soho. With you instead of that shopgirl. What a comedown."

Illya rolled up his napkin. "Hold your temper, Napoleon. Our uncle from New York sent us out to think after we got our bellies comfortably full, not to entertain ourselves. Do you feel the same way I do?"

"How's that?" Solo asked as The Costermongers howled and twanged away ferociously.

"Not in the least eager to conduct strategy talks, for the simple reason that I am completely out of ideas about our next move."

"You're not the only one. About the only thing we can do is visit Shelley's lab in Golder's Green tonight. According to the doctors, Shelley isn't going to be able to stand the shock of another revival for at least twenty-four hours. I have the unpleasant feeling that while we spin our wheels, THRUSH is gaining ground."

Illya stared rather apathetically into his water glass. "Sad but true. Well—as long as we're on expense account, perhaps I'll break my habit and indulge myself." He rose. "Excuse me, Napoleon. I'm going to try to locate a one dollar cigar. While I'm gone, try to think about Project Ahab. Come up with something original."

"Go get yourself a Beatle cut," said his friend with some distemper.

"But I already have one."

Illya vanished into the gloom. Solo called for another ale. The Costermongers finished their act, smiling and bowing like marionettes. Still no one seemed interested.

Solo perked up as a rather svelte young lady in a gold evening gown came onstage. A new placard by the side of the stage read, *Cleo St. Cloud, Mistress of Mentalism.* Solo toyed with the notion of asking her to read a few dozen THRUSH brains as a clue to what was in works in the way of a plot. He watched her twenty-minute turn with some interest.

Miss St. Cloud had liltingly upturned greenish eyes and a smooth delivery. She began by selecting several reluctant volunteers from the audience. She subjected them to a hypnotism susceptibility test, had them lace their fingers together with arms extended in front of the head. After appropriate syrup-voiced mumbo jumbo with Miss St. Cloud, the writhing subjects seemed unable to pull their fingers apart.

Two of the victims were chosen for further hilarity. The girl held the audience's attention better than the other performers had. By the time she had finished, one of the volunteers had completely disarranged his suit, scratching imaginary insects and the other, a typical Colonel

Blimp figure, had drawn mild titters from the audience—this was an enthusiastic response for Britishers, Napoleon Solo decided—as he attempted to wiggle in and out of an invisible girdle.

All through the hypnotist's act, Solo found himself staring at the girl's hair. Silken-yellow it was, with the lacquered metal look of a heavy dose of spray. Something about the whole performance bothered him, nudging the back of his conscious mind.

At the turn's end, Miss St. Cloud snapped her fingers. She kissed each volunteer on the forehead as he awakened, and thanked them both for letting her hypnotize them. Then she walked smartly off stage. The next turn was Clyde and Jasper. Jasper turned out to be a dachsund who jumped through hoops and rang bells with his paw to add simple sums.

Only then did he realize what was wrong.

Coming into The Rocker Shop from the drizzling fog, he and Illya Kuryakin had paused under the naked bulbs of the club front. They'd glanced briefly at the poster announcing the various turns. A female hypnotist was given prominent billing. Solo couldn't remember the posted name, but her photo, a black and white theatrical glossy mounted, registered now.

The girl vaudevillian whose face was displayed on the street was a brunette. She was rather pretty but pudgy-cheeked. She in no way resembled the blonde.

Napoleon Solo stood up abruptly. He gave his head one sharp shake to clear it of the fumes of the good English ale. He'd watched Cleo St. Cloud's whole act under the assumption that Illya had taken a stool at the bar, not wanting to disturb the silence which prevailed while the girl was on stage. With a crawling sensation on his scalp, Solo wondered whether he'd made a wrong assumption.

He turned quickly. Two RAF officers sat at the bar. There was no one else.

Illya Kuryakin wasn't in sight anywhere.

Apprehension began to gnaw Solo's gut. He barely remembered to put a few pound notes on the tablecloth. Then he started for the bar. The man on duty, a beefy fellow with a huge red moustaches, was cooperative enough:

"Funny thin chap, wasn't 'e? 'Air down in his eyes, right? I figured maybe 'e was a replacement for one of the Costermongers. They're always 'avin bloody fights over 'oo gets 'ow much of the take. One or the other of 'em quits every week or so. Yes, your friend was 'ere, right enough. Just about the time Miss St. Cloud came on stage. Didn't look 'erself tonight. New wig, I guess. I'm nearsighted, y'know. The missus is always nagging me to get eyeglasses—"

"I appreciate all that," Solo said.

"Your missus must be a sterling woman."

"You wouldn't be givin' me some of your American 'ighbrow lip, would you, mate?"

"I am not. I just want to know when you saw my friend last."

"Told yer! Right around the time Miss St. Cloud come on."

"What happened to him? Where did he go?"

"If yer want to be blunt about it, 'e went to the water closet to wash 'is 'ands."

The barkeep jerked a well-fleshed thumb. Napoleon Solo charged toward the dim little stairway leading down.

In the small lower-level corridor, harshly lighted, the paint peeling from its orange walls, Solo stopped.

"Illya?" He said it softly. Something moved at the corner of his vision. He jerked around, hand going under his smartly tailored jacket for the butt of his ever-ready pistol.

But what had caught his attention was only his own reflection in the large mirror-glass front of a cheap American-style vending machine which sold combs, packets of tissues, headache and upset stomach remedies and similar items. Solo stared at his image in the mirror, which covered half the front of the chrome-knobbed machine. Mr. Waverly had sent them out to dine and think while he attended to paperwork. Now Solo had blown the whole bit for fair.

"You bloody fool," he said to the mirror. "To coin a phrase."

Pulling out his pistol, he edged carefully through the door labelled *Gentlemen's*. Nothing.

He edged back into the hall and walked to its end, where there was another door. This he pulled open, dodging back.

Light spilled out ahead of him. Dampness tugged at his cuffs. He advanced cautiously up a short flight of concrete stairs which ended at the cobbles of an alley above. He sniffed the night air with its mixture of fish and petrol aromas. No one was in the alley.

On the street taxicabs and private cars were passing, wet bonnets reflecting bizarre patterns of the multicolored Soho neons. Illya was gone.

Illya was gone and Solo was sure THRUSH had him.

Then, with an abruptness that made him jump there was a low, insistent beep from his inner left breast pocket. He whipped out his communicator, flicked a knob on the surface of the flat black box. The signal intensified.

Solo was switched onto the channel used for homing devices. Somewhere, somehow, Illya had managed to activate one.

In five minutes Solo had switched channels briefly, made an emergency call, summoned one of the U.N.C.L.E. vehicles at his disposal, a dilapidated-looking, high-powered taxicab, and was ripping

through the London Streets. The man at the wheel drove at highly illegal speeds. Solo sat tensely beside him, the homing signal chattering loudly from where the receiver lay on the leather seat beside him.

What worried him was knowing that a homing signal going full force did not necessarily indicate that the person who'd turned it on was still alive.

FIVE

STEPPING FROM the Gentlemen's into the seedy orange-painted hall, Illya Kuryakin's attention was caught by two things.

One was a spattering of applause. It indicated that the musically impoverished group known as The Costermongers had departed the stage. The other was his frankly jaunty appearance, visible in a mirror on the front of a garish vending machine.

Ordinarily Illya didn't indulge in cigars. But the large, executive-type Corona-Corona Special De-Luxe clenched between his teeth at a jaunty angle lent him, he felt, a debonair appearance which he rather fancied. He stepped closer to the mirror to pull up the knot in his rep tie a bit more neatly.

The mirror opened outward from the vending machine and smashed him across the face.

Illya reeled back. He was more outraged than hurt. Grinning at him from inside the vending machine was a pock-faced man with a pistol.

"Be so kind as to stand in that place, Mr. Kuryakin. The others will be along momentarily."

Illya had no desire to wait and make their acquaintance. As the lower half of the vending machine began to open also, like the bottom of a Dutch door, Illya lashed out with a savage kick. The kick smashed the door, and the gunman, back inside the vending machine. The gunman cursed, flailed. He extended his pistol hand out of the machine for a better aim at the U.N.C.L.E. agent. Illya slammed the upper door hard.

The man squealed.

"Sing, my little THRUSH," Illya said with cheerful nastiness as

the man's fingers flew open and the pistol dropped.

"Kuryakin!"

The command spun him around. Two more well-dressed men in bowlers and overcoats with velvet lapels had entered from the alley. Both carried guns. The spokesman rushed forward. There was a groan and a creak of metal from inside the vending machine. The ugly-faced Thrushmen both glanced in that direction. Illya used the interval to dive his hand under his coat for his pistol.

He might have made it if the secret agent in the vending machine, apparently unconscious from having his gun hand nearly snapped off, hadn't slumped forward. The man's dead weight pushed both of the machine doors outward fast. Illya got another very un-funny bash in the nose. By the time he'd wrestled his pistol out of its shoulder rig the two assailants were on him.

They chopped the back of his neck with gun butts. Illya dropped to his knees, fighting the pain. He started to yell. One of the THRUSH uglies yanked his head back by the hair. The other jammed an unsavory-tasting leather glove between his jaws.

Then they flicked his face brutally a couple of more times with their pistol muzzles. They kept him from falling by dragging him under the arms.

Everything revolved in Illya's field of vision. Everything had the same quality of fuzziness he'd encountered after his first youthful bout with a flask of vodka.

"Quietly, quietly," snarled one of the THRUSH kidnapers as they dragged Illya through the door and up into the alley. His knees bumped painfully over the cobbles. Strength was returning. He mentally vetoed fighting any further for the moment. It might be more profitable to discover where he was being taken and, more importantly, to whom.

The answer to this last question came quickly. A squat, powerful Daimler auto, its blue fog lamps shining eerily through the murk, was parked around a bend in the alleyway. Illya was dumped on all fours in the tonneau. The THRUSH agents leaped into the front.

"Good evening, Kuryakin," said a voice which seemed to echo out of a funeral vault six miles away.

Illya turned his head. Lying on the floorboard, he was staring at the toe of a brightly polished boot. He twisted his head further. Above him floated an immense black mountain-shape, topped by a white blob. Gradually his eyes adjusted.

"Allow me, my dear fellow," said the rear seat's occupant, helping him up to a sitting position. As he collapsed against the leather, Illya felt something hard in his suit pocket strike against his hipbone. He remembered his communicator. He had to find an opportunity to set the homing signal for Napoleon.

He wondered why the car didn't start.

"We have been following you and your associate Solo all evening," commented his host, a big heap of a man bundled within a vicuna overcoat with a flamboyant fur collar. "I am glad my men were able to spare you excessive violence to your person. We have a very important task for you to perform. I'm sure you'll be delighted to cooperate."

The man had a strong, square, face, deeply tanned and seamed as though by exposure to rough weather. His nose was faintly hooked, perhaps denoting origins in the Levant. But his English was of Oxford. He had a neatly-trimmed black spade beard and wore a fur diplomat's cap and kid-skin gloves.

He peeled off the right glove and extended his hand. "It would be courteous if I introduced myself. Commander Victor Ahab, sir."

Illya's eyes narrowed. "No, thank you," he said to the hand.

Ahab's cheeks puffed out. He blasted Illya Kuryakin across the face with the back of his bare hand, a slamming blow. Illya swallowed, lifted his right fist.The guns aimed at him by the agents in the front seat deterred him.

Victor Ahab, THRUSH naval strategist, was quivering. "You—you filthy, degenerate, arrogant little U.N.C.L.E. upstart!"

Ahab carefully pulled his glove on again. He cleared his throat. "I am grateful I don't have to do much business with you, Kuryakin. I would very likely break your neck with my own hands." He smiled. "As you have just discovered, I am rather easily provoked to anger. It is perhaps my one failing."

Illya wondered how he could find an opportunity to turn on the homing transmitter. "You are supposed to be dead."

"The world is full of little surprises. It was expedient that I disappear for a time. I have emerged to what will surely be my finest hour. And THRUSH's."

One of the operatives in front said, "Beg pardon, Commander."

"What is it?"

"Miss Cleo's turn is over. She's coming now, sir."

"Get the engine going. We have pressing work for Mr. Kuryakin in Golder's Green." High heels ticked outside the car. A young woman's form took shape in the mist. Victor Ahab folded down the jump seat for her, then bent across toward the door handle. His formidable paunch prevented him from reaching it.

"Come, Kuryakin! Don't be a boor."

This was the opportunity. Illya hunched around to the right, using his left hand to depress the handle. The girl, trailing perfume, jumped inside with a jingly little laugh of satisfaction. She smoothed down her bolero jacket of gleaming silver

fox, and all these bits of business gave Illya the moment he needed to slip his right hand into his pocket, activate the proper stud, and send a signal silently into the night.

It was the signal to his friend Napoleon Solo.

The Daimler's engine whispered. The car glided out into gaudy neon traffic at a cautious speed. Commander Ahab gestured to the prisoner.

"Cleo my sweet, allow me to present your next subject. Mr. Kuryakin of U.N.C.L.E. This is Miss Cleo St. Cloud, a most experienced young woman."

"Well, not really," the girl laughed. She eyed Illya like a lawyer.

"Ah, now, don't be modest," said Commander Ahab, tweaking her knee. Miss St. Cloud shuddered.

"I didn't mean that I wasn't experienced, Victor."

"And naturally I referred to your experience in the area of hypnosis, my dear."

Illya decided that she was quite stunning. But her smile was brittle. And her green eyes, like the eyes of all the followers of the supra-government that was THRUSH, were holes into a secret world where lived an unholy lust to conquer at any cost. She spoke:

"What I meant to say, Mr. Kuryakin, was that my name really isn't Cleo St. Cloud. I'm wanted in a few too many countries for me to tell you what my name really is. Cleo will do. Victor, give me a cigarette."

Ahab wheezed, tugging out a silver case in a way which Illya found nauseating. Cleo lit up, drew in a couple of hot blue drags, then smiled at him. "We doped the real Miss St. Cloud, Mr. Kurakin. I took her place on stage tonight, once we were sure you were in the club with your friend. I haven't done one of those stage routines in years. Fortunately I got through it. My real subject is you."

Illya tried to look bored. "Hypnotism is nothing but cheap theatrics."

"Oh no, sweets, on the contrary," said Cleo. "It's a widely used medical tool."

"Better hurry, my dear," Ahab said. "It won't take us long to reach Golder's Green. You see, Mr. Kuryakin, what we plan is simplicity itself. In order to complete the THRUSH project of which I am the supervisor—project, incidentally, which will finally and for all time result in the total domination of all nations by THRUSH—require exclusive use of certain research data which is the property of Dr. Artemus Shelley."

"By exclusive use," Illya said, "you mean you take or destroy the data so that no one else can use it? And then you insure its exclusively by making sure Dr. Shelley is either in your hands or dead?"

Commander Ahab's black beard gleamed as he nodded. "Unfortu-

nately, you and your friend Solo balked our attempt to kidnap Shelley and get him out of the country. You also foiled certain associates of mine, who are going to wish they'd succeeded, when they tried to eliminate Dr. Shelley at the hospital.

"Now, however, while other phases of the plan go forward, we must get Shelley's secret data from his files. His laboratory is under heavy guard. Only one sort of person could manage to get in. A recognized, trusted agent of U.N.C.L.E."

Lights glided past the car in the fog. Illya had a feeling of isolation, of being hopelessly trapped. Only the knowledge that the homing signal was being beamed to Solo's pocket communicator buoyed him up.

"You want me to go into the lab and find his papers?" Illya said. "What makes you possibly think I would?"

Commander Ahab chuckled as the car took a corner. "We know you wouldn't. Voluntarily."

Cleo St. Cloud had opened the front of her silver fox jacket. She unfastened a gold chain around her neck. A large stone which appeared to be glass, hung from the chain on her bosom. When she pulled the chain free the stone's retaining ring allowed the stone to slide down to one end, where it dangled.

Next she flicked the cheap-looking glassy bauble with her finger. Immediately it began to glow a deep red.

The reddish light pulsed stronger and weaker. It cast a weird ruby glow over the interior of the racing car.

"Here, Victor, you do the honors," Cleo said. "Swing it gently back and forth. Gently! Now, Mr. Kuryakin, I am going to place you into the deepest state of hypnosis. That business of subjects being unable to be hypnotized against their will, and of refusing to do anything against their morals—both those notions are simply more of the tommyrot which surrounds the science of hypnotism. If they weren't sheer myths, I wouldn't dare tell you what I'm telling you, would I?"

She smiled with sweet venom. Illya had difficulty keeping his eyes off the bauble at the end of the chain. Ahab swung it back and forth, back and forth, while the reddish light from its interior, a small, burning spot of brightness, alternately brightened and dimmed, brightened and dimmed.

Illya began to feel dizzy.

"I intend to give you two simple post-hypnotic suggestions, Mr. Kuryakin. One will be an order to go into Dr. Shelley's laboratory and search it, tear it apart, until you locate a file folder which bears the code letters CR dash ninety-nine dash two. You will destroy it. The second suggestion will be an order to instantly shoot and kill anyone who disturbs you. How are you

feeling, Mr. Kuryakin? Eyelids heavy?"

Illya shook his head. "No-no, I'm wide awake. It won't work."

"Watch the light, Mr. Kuryakin." Her voice was soft, insinuating. *"Watch the ruby light.* You are tired, Mr. Kuryakin. *You are tired in every muscle, every fiber of your body. Weary* to death. *You have one consuming desire. The desire for sleep—"*

Cold horror welled up in Illya's mind. What if the plot worked?

What if by some mad chance he did fall under their command? What if he *were* instructed to shoot and kill anyone who attempted to stop him from searching Shelley's quarters? The homing transmitter was silently signalling from his pocket, the signal searching the night, hunting for Solo, bringing Solo in pursuit.

He had to turn off the transmitter.

His hands, like fifty-pound bags of cement, remained in his lap. He could not move them.

Back, forth, back, forth went the ruby light on the chain. Brighter, dimmer, brighter—

"Sleep, Mr. Kuryakin. You are sleepy, totally tired, ready to obey me—"

Fight it, fight it, fight it, he thought. The ruby light swelled and filled the world. Then everything went black.

The Daimler let him out on a damp, foggy corner, then sped off into the dark. Illya Kuryakin stood shivering under a lonely streetlamp.

His mouth was slack. His eyes were empty of emotion. He began to walk along the pavement under the looming cement wall of a building whose large signboard read FLETCHAM AND STROOL, WOOLEN GOODS.

Two U.N.C.L.E. security men with triangular badges challenged him at the gate in the wire fence round the next corner. Illya identified himself and was admitted. His right hand curled around the butt of a pistol which had somehow gotten into his pocket.

He had almost pulled it out and shot the two guards to death for presuming to question him.

And nothing remained in his mind to tell him that Napoleon Solo was on the way.

ACT II

"NOBODY HERE BUT US TOURISTS"

THE TAXICAB deposited Napoleon Solo in front of the innocuous and deserted facade of Fletcham & Strool, Woolen Goods. The driver, an U.N.C.L.E. man, said, "Want a bit of help, sir?"

Climbing out, Solo shook his head. "Let me look the situation over first. You cruise around a little. If you spot anything, suspicious cars or whatnot, go right on. Circle

back, park here and wait. Got your receiver on the right band?"

The driver tapped his knuckles against a dashboard unit. "Channel F, lined up on yours."

"The homing signal is still going strong. Illya must be inside."

Solo turned up the amplification on his communicator, let the signal beep-beep loudly a second, then damped it down. He slammed the taxicab door. The vehicle rattled off.

Solo walked along under the gloomy wall. At the gate in the wire fence around the corner, he discovered two agents with riot pistols. He flashed his identification.

"Solo, Operations and Enforcement out of New York."

The taller guard hooked an eyebrow up. "One of your mates is already 'ere, sir. Mr. Kurry-what's-'is-name."

Solo's backbone crawled again. "Kuryakin. How long has he been inside?"

"Five, ten minutes, I'd say."

"Alone?"

"Right."

"How did he look? Banged up? Like he'd been beaten? Or drugged?"

"Seemed all right to us, sir. Spoke a little slowly. Yawned once. It's late, though."

"I hope it's not later than we think," Solo said, slipping past them.

One of the guards threw an electric switch on the gate post. The

lock in the steel outer door whirred. Solo stepped through into the hollow emptiness of a warehouse full of bales on wooden pallets.

Far down an aisle a light gleamed. Carefully Solo drew out his pistol and began walking.

He was drenched with cold sweat and sure something was diabolically wrong.

If Illya had escaped his captors, he would have turned off the homing signal and called via Channel D. Yet THRUSH was not so lunatic as to send a captive Illya off on his own. Solo didn't understand it. But his lonely passage through the eerie, towering avenues of stacked bales wrenched his nerves another notch tighter.

The bale storage area came to an end. Ahead brighter lights gleamed in a short corridor. There was a gray-painted door at the end. Beyond that door should lie Dr. Shelley's outer workrooms.

Warily, Solo ran forward.

Half way down the corridor, Solo dug in his heels and skidded up short. From beyond the gray-painted door he heard bangs and crashings, as though of office furniture being overturned. He sniffed. The source of the acrid odor became clear in a moment. From under the gray-painted door, wisps of smoke were curling.

He jumped to the heavy door, pulled it open quickly. "Illya?"

Solo could see little of the area beyond the first workroom, which boiled with smoke. The smoke issued from another doorway in the far side of the room, which was full of filing cabinets. Holding a hand to his mouth, Solo advanced. Beyond the next doorway, bright spurts of flame flickered through the roiling grayness.

He called Illya's name again. The answer came back, curiously flat, nasal:

"Who is that?"

"Napoleon." Now Solo was near the inner door. "Did THRUSH fire the place? Where are you—" Just at the moment he reached the door the smoke thinned momentarily. He was on the verge of entering Dr. Shelley's inner laboratory when something in his unconscious checked him. Illya's voice sounded too strange.

Solo strained to see through the smoke billowing from the contents of a number of filing cabinets. The files smoldered on the tile floor between two long laboratory benches laden with glassware. A shape whirled the smoke.

Illya's head emerged from the smoke first. Then his torso, arms and hands. In his left hand Illya gripped a fat file folder with a gray cover. In his right was a gun, aimed directly at Solo in the doorway.

A relieved grin spread over Solo's face. "You're alone. I thought for a minute—"

Solo stopped. Illya's face was immobile as marble. His eyes had a strange, empty look in them. Suddenly Illya's right hand twitched. It was all the warning Solo had.

He rolled like a tumbler, wildly, as Illya began pumping bullets at the door.

The shots crashed in the smoky lab. Solo somersaulted up and threw his whole weight at Illya, grappling for his gun hand. The moment Solo's hand closed on his wrist, Illya began to snarl and fight. He dropped the file folder accidentally and this seemed to panic him. He kicked at it, trying to shove it toward the smoldering pile of manuscripts.

Solo struggled to wrestle the gun away. Illya's face was ugly.

"You mustn't stop me. You

mustn't stop me." He repeated it in a kind of mechanical desperation. Whatever drug had been given him, Solo decided, had also given a tremendous boost to his strength. Despite the fact that Solo had hold of Illya's gun wrist with both hands, Illya was still managing to turn that gun so it pointed right at Solo's belt buckle.

Solo felt Illya's arm writhe.

That warning he felt through his fingers saved his life. The pistol whammed an instant after Solo released his grip and jacknifed backwards.

The bullet blasted lab glassware on the nearby bench. A shard hit Solo's cheek, slashed it open. Illya seemed to have forgotten the file folder. It lay on the floor, its upper right corner smoldering.

Illya lurched through the smoke, coughing. His gun muzzle quested for Solo, who was floundering in the middle of a mess of broken glass. Suddenly Illya gave a savage wince. He shuddered.

"You—shouldn't have come here." He whimpered it, almost as though he recognized his friend. "I don't want—to kill you. I haven't any choice, Na—" He stumbled over the name, pronounced it haltingly. "Napoleon."

Then, as though wracked by awful internal pressures, he threw his head back and howled, *"I haven't any choice!"*

Illya's face glazed over again. He wrapped both hands around the pistol to steady it. He took one step and pointed at his friend's forehead.

Through all this, Solo had been crouched against one of the lab bench fronts. Illya was three feet away, aiming. Solo whipped his hand over his head. He grabbed the first thing his fingers touched, yanked. A Bunsen burner and its tubing—

Illya Kuryakin shuddered and fired once, twice. Solo was rolling again, his other cheek cut by broken glass as he skidded across the floor. He jumped up. Using the base ring of the burner as his weapon, he lunged in from the side.

Illya tried to turn. He seemed dazed, slow-moving. Solo crashed the burner ring down on his friend's skull with all his might.

Illya groaned. Solo gave him a hand-chop to the back of the neck. Illya dropped to his knees.

Napoleon Solo snatched his gun as it fell. Illya blinked, shook his head. Then he caught sight of the gray folder with the code letters CR-99-2 embossed on the cover. His hand twitched feebly toward it.

"Got to burn that," he said. Then louder, anguished: "Got to burn that, got to burn it—"

Part of the cover was alight, sending up sparks. Solo snatched the folder from the blazing pile of reference papers. Illya let out a moan of frustration. He covered his face and sobbed.

What was wrong with him? Solo

wondered as he slapped the file cover against his trousers to douse the sparks. He caught his friend by the scruff of his coat collar and dragged him away from the flames. Illya continued to burble and moan, eyes closed, as though tortured by his failure. Solo hauled him all the way into the outer workroom.

Using the butt of Illya's gun, Solo smashed the glass in a wall fire alarm box. Immediately, sprinklers recessed in the ceiling began a hissing deluge. A siren warbled. Solo sheltered the charred file against his jacket and staggered through the smoke to find a telephone and call for an U.N.C.L.E. ambulance.

Illya Kuryakin had rolled over onto his face, totally motionless.

TWO

MR. ALEXANDER WAVERLY ticked the stem of his pipe against his teeth.

"Hypnosis, eh? Devilish."

Slouched deep in one of the leather chairs in the old Victorian headquarters room, his head muffled from the eyebrows up in a bandage, Illya looked disconsolate.

"Apparently it wasn't so deep that I didn't struggle to break out," he said. "I think I realized it was Napoleon I would be shooting. Otherwise I have no memory of what happened after Miss St. Cloud—that isn't her real name, by the way—began her tender ministrations in Commander Ahab's car."

Napoleon Solo had been listening with half an ear. Now he put the telephone back on its cradle, crossed the rug to where an even more fatigued-looking Mr. Waverly leaned against the mantel.

"We can go up to the computer center any time, sir," Solo said. He grinned at Illya. "Are you up to it, Sleeping Beauty?"

Illya Kuryakin stood up, swaying a little. He managed a half-way grin. "I find your levity difficult to understand, Napoleon. After all, I very nearly removed any further opportunities for you to go overcoat-shopping."

Solo looked serious. "You wouldn't have gone through with it. I still owe you thirty-three dollars from our last gin rummy game."

The three men left the room. They moved down a stuffy corridor full of upholstered furniture and rubber plants and entered an elevator. It rose swiftly. Mr. Waverly bestirred himself from a rather cross-eyed mood of concentration, cleared his throat.

"Yes, it was a near thing all around," he said. "But at least it has netted us certain facts."

Solo nodded. "Commander Ahab is with us, and apparently master-minding a new major operation for THRUSH."

"And somehow or other, it centers around tidal waves and other oceanographic phenomenon," Waverly continued as the steel cage stopped.

They moved out into an upper-story corridor which was bare of the Victorian furnishings found on the lower levels. Here, squarely functional lighted panels winked on and off in the ceiling, teleprinters whirred beyond the open doorways of fluorescently bright rooms, and personnel moved briskly back and forth on various errands.

Mr. Waverly continued in a musing tone: "Since you, Mr. Solo, managed to overcome Mr. Kuryakin before he burned Dr. Shelley's CR-99-2 file, we really owe our opponents thanks. They led us to the key material which Dr. Shelley, due to his unconscious state, could not pinpoint for us. We may now make certain judgments about the current THRUSH activity."

Mr. Waverly's brow rose inquiringly. Illya Kuryakin picked up the cue.

"We must assume that the tidal wave which nearly killed us was not an accident," he said. "Newsom Nagelsmith may have summoned it from an unknown source when he realized he was finished." Illya didn't need to elaborate further on the grim threat posed by this kind of scientific manipulation of natural forces.

Solo pondered a minute, said: "From the contents of that file, we also know Dr. Shelley was gathering reports and data on similar tidal waves that have occurred mysteriously at various places around the world during the past year. He may or may not have concluded that THRUSH was perfecting a means to control ocean currents. But THRUSH *thought* he'd stumble on it sooner or later if he hadn't already. So that was a good enough reason for them wanting both Dr. Shelley and his master file wiped out."

"Good thinking, Mr. Solo." Waverly rolled back sliding glass doors and stepped into a two-story chamber filled with incredibly big computers all a-dazzle with winking lights.

A young man with spectacles as thick as safety glass bustled toward them as Waverly finished: "Now we must attempt to make some sense out of that one small hand-scribbled note we discovered in the file. Ah, Boltshot, good morning."

"Morning, sir, morning," said the computer technician. Noting Illya's bandage-swaddled head, he added, "You visiting firemen must have been spending a bit of time carousing, eh? Well, nothing like a good night on the town away from home."

"That's right," Solo said sourly. "It's just been one good time after another."

Mr. Waverly gestured. "Which of these units have you programmed with the problem, Boltshot?"

Dry-washing his hands, the technician led the way. "Right down here, sir. Supervac twenty-two-Q, our latest addition. It's a regular

little darling of a unit, sir. The only thing Supervac twenty-two-Q can't do is cook up a nice bowl of red cabbage and if it ever learns to do that, Tessie my dear, I tell my wife, you'll be posting a Situation Wanted in the newspaper."

The technician whipped a punch card from a slot in the nearest, light-flecked monster.

"As I was given the details, sir, Dr. Shelley's file contained a handwritten excerpt from a news clipping to the effect that some fishermen off the coast of Holland swore one day last month that they saw something like a white whale surfacing. Fantastic, of course. They were probably loaded with schnapps."

Under Waverly's glare, Boltshot returned his attention to the card, waving it back and forth: "Uh—well, you wish to know whether this whale-like apparition could have been a submarine. Of course Supervac has no way of telling that. Operating upon your second assumption—that the thing *was* a submarine—what locations might currently be serving as the necessary fuelling station or stations? Supervac has no way of knowing *that,* either."

Illya said darkly, "It must be good for something." Two tape drums began to spin with an eerie whine. Napoleon Solo nudged his friend.

"You've hurt its feelings."

Boltshot sniffed. "Many lay persons do not understand the computer, gentlemen. It can only perform within certain fixed limits. One thing it can do is report on locations in Europe at which THRUSH operatives have been observed within the last six months. Narrowing the selection to locations in a coastal position—obviously a requirement for a submarine fueling station—Supervac Q-Twenty-two has already pinpointed a single current possibility."

Boltshot thrust another punched card proudly at Mr. Waverly, who scowled.

"Come, come, man, I can't make out what these holes mean!"

"The language of logic, sir. This punch stands for Cornwall. This punch, the coast. This punch, Castle Sykedon. That's a small village whose exact location can be found on any map. I went to the trouble of phoning up the Information Center for additional facts. Castle Sykedon, for which the village was named, is an actual feudal castle which has stood in disrepair for many years.

"Mid-summer of last year, a private syndicate known as Pan-British Tourist Properties, Ltd., bought it up and refurbished it. They opened it in late September as an attraction for visitors. There were workmen of all sorts on the scene for months prior to this time, or so the Center told me. There was a great deal of heavy construction equipment present also. And

THRUSH agents were seen in the vicinity at various times."

Mr. Waverly touched the punch card with his pipe. "This may well be it."

Frown lines appeared on Solo's forehead. "Refurbishing an entire castle would be a perfect cover for moving in the equipment needed to build a submarine fuelling station. That is, provided the castle itself is actually located on the water."

Boltshot looked wounded. "We specifically requested Supervac to supply only those locations which are directly on the ocean. Supervac does not make mistakes."

Mr. Waverly nodded briskly. "Yes, yes, Boltshot, no offense intended. Thank you very much."

As they rode downward in the elevator again, Mr. Waverly said, "Gentlemen, I believe we may finally be making some headway toward uncovering the nature of Project Ahab. The sightings by the Dutch fishermen—Naglesmith's warnings about a white whale—the mysterious re-appearance of Commander Ahab—Dr. Shelley's research—it all points to something extremely big and extremely dangerous for U.N.C.L.E. and the world. Mr. Solo, is your Brownie in repair?"

The elevator stopped. Solo said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Your Brownie, your Kodak, your camera. All tourists carry cameras."

"I have a feeling," Illya said, "we are going to be sent on holiday."

"All expenses paid," said Mr. Waverly, unsmiling. He waved the punch card. "To Cornwall."

THREE

THE ROAD was steep. It wound upward from the tiny village, a gravel thoroughfare so rough that tourists had to take it on foot. The central crown of the roadway stuck up so high that it would have scraped away half the underparts of any taxicab which attempted the trip.

The air smelled of sea wind. Far below, combers broke on rocks. Solo and Illya had been tramping for perhaps fifteen minutes. The afternoon was bright and sunny.

Ahead of them the road twisted out of sight behind huge boulders. But their destination loomed against the sky, great stone turrets standing out in sinister relief. Dozens of tourists of every description were going up and down the road to Castle Sykedon.

Solo and Illya passed a low, flat rock upon which sat two portly American ladies. One had her shoe off.

She was massaging her toe and bewailing the inavailability of Coca-Cola.

"Personally," Solo said out of the corner of his mouth, "I think we've carried things a little far with this

get-up. This idiotic tassel keeps falling in my eyes."

Illya was attired in a wide-brimmed straw hat and one-way sunglasses with immense lenses. He carried two cameras and a gadget bag strung over his shoulders. He clucked his tongue.

"It may irritate you, Napoleon, but it's excellent cover. No one will remember our faces, only our paraphernalia. Besides, Americans overseas always go out of their way to look like Americans."

He was referring to Solo's red fez with black tassel. The fez bore gold embroidery identifying the wearer as a member of the Imperial Order of Pachyderms, Lodge No. 302. Solo also had a camera strung around his neck, and a gadget bag bulging with road maps, tourist folders and several bags of potato chips.

In a few more moments they reached the summit of the road. Tourists were lined up outside a booth beside a turnstile set in a high outer stone wall. Two men who looked much too burly and scarred to be villagers collected entrance fees, scrutinizing each arrival with hard eyes. As they got in line, Illya whispered, "Look at those lads. Do you hear a bird singing?"

"The yellow-backed thrush, I think it is," Solo answered.

When their turn came, the guards seemed to inspect them with extra care. Solo felt sweat on his eyelid under his sun-glasses. Finally one guard slapped a ticket into Solo's hand. He jerked his thumb at the turnstile. Solo and then Illya passed through.

As they wandered over to the parapet on the sea side of the castle courtyard, Illya said, "I saw the second guard in the booth turn some sort of switch. Probably a scanner. Lucky we didn't fetch our guns along."

Solo shrugged. "I suppose. But I don't feel very secure just armed with potato chips."

Along the parapet tourists leaned over for a dizzying view of the cliffs on which Castle Sykedon was built. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin joined in the activity. Their interest was more specific. They kept up a running line of inane chatter while their eyes ranged back and forth, hunting for some trace of shadow down at the base of the cliff hundreds of yards down. A brisk sea was running. Waves crashed in and foamed onto big rocks far below.

"Nothing shows," Illya whispered after a moment.

"Good old Supervac Twenty-two-Q does it again," Solo said disgustedly.

Suddenly, though, his attention was caught by a dull metal flash under the surface of the water directly below him. The patch of water in question roiled between two partly submerged boulders which were farther apart than most of the other rocks. By a freak of the tides, the passage was momentarily un-

troubled by waves. Solo had a chance to take a lightning quick second look.

Illya watched him intently. Solo whipped his camera from around his neck, pretended to snap a soaring gull. Behind the camera's cover, he said, "I saw it. Some kind of protective wire grill or grating in that channel. Under the surface. Probably electrified, raised and lowered from inside."

With a fatuous look on his face, he finished fooling with his camera and turned back to the courtyard. Sure enough, one of the uniformed guards in the booth was watching them. Solo gestured at the high stone steps leading up into the castle. Pretending to laugh, he said, "I think we've found our bird's nest. That's a net guarding a sub pen entrance down there. Let's go to work."

Their feet clacked as they passed into the gloom of Castle Sykedon. A placard near the entrance announced that the castle closed for the day at six. Less than three hours.

At various points in the corridors and huge, vaulted halls, stiff-backed guards in neat, undistinguished uniforms stood with hands laced at the small of the backs, staring ahead at nothing. Their eyes never seemed to move, but Solo had the uncanny feeling that no visitor went unobserved. From the tough jaw-lines and broken noses of some of these specimens, Solo felt even more sure that they were in a THRUSH installation.

In the huge main dining hall of the castle, Illya and Solo drew off into a corner and pretended to admire an intricately wrought suit of armor. The light was dim, falling through high open slit windows. Only one THRUSH guard watched this chamber. He was stationed at the entrance.

Solo took a small sketch pad and charcoal pencil from his gadget bag. He pencilled the words *Need hide till six* on the pad. Then, with bold, quick strokes, he made a sketch of the casque of the armored figure on top of the message, obscuring it. As he and Illya left the chamber Solo noted that the guard's eyes slid around to get a clear look at the sheet of paper on which he was still doing some shading.

They explored further, moving in and out of the crowds of families, widows, of schoolchildren. In one cobweb-hung cul-de-sac on the main floor, the agents spotted a large, old wooden chest. It looked large enough to accommodate both of them. Illya sat down on it. He complained loudly about smarting bunions.

By shifting his weight back and forth Illya was able to determine that the lid of the chest was not nailed shut. Solo sat down next to him, made some more corrections on the armor sketch. He used his scribblings to jot some additional

code words suggesting his plan of action. Illya nodded. A guard passed by the entrance to the cul-de-sac, pausing to tie his shoe.

"Well, Wilbur," Solo said in a loud voice, "let's get this show on the road." Settling his fez at a jaunty angle, he marched over to the guard. "Is there a pop concession any place around?"

"No, there isn't." The guard had a rumbling voice and a right ear which bore an ugly scar.

"Well, guess I'll just have to eat some of my own potato chips." Solo pulled out a cellophane sack. Making a great show, he tore it open. The guard scowled as Solo and Illya began to munch chips by the handful, dribbling a trail of crumbs behind them.

Up ahead, a number of stout women in floral print dresses and picture hats had stopped before an impressively carved throne chair. One of their number was reading from a guidebook. Solo dug in the bottom of the potato chip bag until he found the pellet he wanted.

He drifted around to a position on the left side of the many-chinned lady reading from the guidebook. Suddenly from the back of the crowd, Illya said, "Oh, I'm very sorry. Terribly clumsy of me—"

Several of the ladies moved out of the way. Illya had spilled his potato chips in grand and crumby style. Heads turned front. The portly lady stood on tiptoe and abandoned the guidebook a moment. Solo cracked the pellet with his thumbnail, and tossed it.

The pellet rolled along the floor, where it lay unobtrusively a few inches behind the lady's right heel. Nothing visible could be seen escaping from the crack in the pellet. But in another moment, the lady began to fan herself with a lace hanky.

"Girls! Girls!" she called. "Time to move on to the next point of interest, which is King Woglyn's water closet—ahem. I believe that's one point of interest we might pass over. I—"

The woman's eyes grew glassy. She dropped the guidebook, swaying. "I feel—faint. It must be the sea air doing it. My legs—I can hardly—" Three of her compatriots rushed forward, luckily catching her bulk before it hit the floor. Consternation gripped the ladies.

Clutching his fez, Napoleon Solo raced back to the guard stationed at the entrance to the cul-de-sac. "A woman's fainted over there."

The guard seemed reluctant to leave his post. The flustered outcries of the females changed his mind. Annoyed, he stalked forward and into the group.

Other guards appeared. Illya Kuryakin had backed away. Solo gave a quick nod and both agents faded quietly down the cul-de-sac. Moments later, they lowered the lid of the huge chest.

Solo tore the cover of a paper match packet in half, carefully

wedged it under the lid. The tiny crack thus produced was enough to enable him to see what was happening outside.

The lady who had fainted from the fumes of the invisible and relatively harmless nerve gas was carried out of sight. Her cohorts followed. Soon the guard was back on duty at the cul-de-sac's entrance. He glanced around suspiciously. Hardly breathing, Solo and Illya crouched in painfully cramped positions inside the chest.

Ten minutes passed.

Fifteen.

Surreptitiously, the guard got out a cigarette and lit it. Cupping it so that it was hidden in one hand, he walked over to the chest, sat down heavily. Solo's view was cut off as the guard's weight bore down.

After a seemingly endless time the guard got up again. Voices drifted faintly through the chest walls. Finally, when it seemed as though he couldn't stand the ache of his pretzel-like position any longer, Solo noted that the illuminated hands on his watch stood at a few minutes past six.

Somewhere heavy doors clanged shut. A mammoth rattle of iron signalled the shooting of a bolt. Footsteps passed the chest. Solo peered out.

He saw the scar-eared guard reach up and give a tug to the handle of an ancient, rusty battle ax hanging on the wall. There was a whir. The wall at the end of a cul-de-sac swung out, revealing a metal partition. This slid out of the way. The guard stepped into what looked like an elevator. The door closed, but the stone partition remained swung out.

During the next fifteen minutes, booted feet passed the chest often. The guards going off duty all took the elevator. At last, when darkness and silence claimed the castle proper again, Solo risked lifting the chest lid.

Illya followed him out. Solo's knees popped like silenced pistols as he straightened up.

"The stone's back in place," he whispered. "Grab the ax handle, Illya."

The other U.N.C.L.E. agent craned up, gave the handle a tug. There was a grinding whine as the partition once more swung aside. Unfortunately there was no indicator beside the call button to show whether the elevator was in use. Solo thumbed the button.

He heard a whine inside the shaft, a sigh of power as the cage reached their floor. The metal door slid aside—

Revealing a pair of startled THRUSH guards just drawing their guns.

FOUR

ONE OF THE occupants of the elevator was the guard with the scar on his ear. An expression of suspicion satisfied flashed over his

thick-featured face. With a flick of his thumb he snapped the setting of his pistol to rapid fire, and began to blaze away point blank.

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents had lunged back out of the way, one to either side of the open doors. The guard's pistol stuttered, tracer rounds pencilling white dashes through the gloom. Solo slammed against the wall, righted himself. He ripped the camera loose from around his neck and flung it like a baseball.

The camera whizzed full speed into the forehead of the second guard, who was just aiming. The man yelped, sagged. Off balance, he fell against the elevator control panel. The doors started to shut.

Seeing that his potential victims were unarmed, the scar-eared guard stopped firing. Backs pressed to opposite walls of the cul-de-sac, Solo and Illya looked at each other. Both understood that if the guards retreated into the elevator and got away, alarms would surely be sounded. Solo watched the guard warily.

The man was toying with them. He sidled forward so that he stood with his backbone against one elevator door, his boot braced against the other to keep the doors from shutting.

"I had a feeling there was something wrong about you two," the guard said. "I told my section chief you hadn't left the castle. The fool wouldn't believe me."

Crouched against the wall, Solo shrugged. "Obviously we've underestimated THRUSH again."

The guard laughed. "As always. Now, if you will be so kind as to accompany me—"

Solo said to his companion across the narrow corridor, "We'd better do what the man says. Climb over that chest and come on. But be careful."

From the corner of his eye, Solo noted the distance to the weapon he hoped to use. He advanced into the center of the corridor. Illya shrugged as if to agree that the odds were indeed too heavily weighted against them. Illya had been crouching behind the chest in which they'd hidden. The shortest way out was to step up on the chest and down on the other side.

Illya performed the first half of this maneuver, a hangdog expression of defeat on his face. He poised to jump down on the other side. Suddenly his legs flew out from under him in a perfect pratt fall that landed him with a thump on his gluteus maximus.

The moment Illya started this distraction routine, Solo moved.

He leaped to the nearest suit of armor on its pedestal, shouted, "One side, Illya," and at the same time got behind the pedestal, which was equipped with castors. A powerful shove, and Solo had the suit of armor rolling full speed at the elevator.

Illya dodged out of the way. The

reactions of the guards were slow. Trying to do something useful for a change, the guard Solo had smacked with the camera lurched forward, jostling his companion. Both guards fired simultaneously. Their aims were off because of the accidental collision.

Ducked low, Solo was right behind the suit of armor as it rolled like a juggernaut into the opening of the elevator. The guards were knocked backward. The scar-eared one jammed his arm forward around the suit of armor wedged into the doorway. He was trying to get off a shot. Illya darted in, caught the out-thrust forearm and brought up his knee.

There was a splintery crack of bone. The guard shrieked, dropped his gun.

Solo gave a yank on the upraised mailed fist of the armor suit. Down it squeaked with surprising speed. The iron fingers hammered the top of the second guard's head. The man's jaw flopped open. His trigger finger jerked automatically. A spray of white tracer slugs screamed past Solo, as the agent reached around the armor and gut-punched his adversary with vicious accuracy.

The man staggered.

Solo's next neck-chop flattened the man cold. Solo looked back over his shoulder.

Illya's head appeared under the upraised arm of the suit of armor. Grinning with a humor he obviously didn't feel, Illya knocked his knuckles against the armored chest. It gave off a hollow ring like an empty oil drum being pounded.

"Stout fellow," Illya said. "We should recommend him to Waverly as a recruit."

"Some other time. Help me drag these birds behind that chest. The THRUSH people know we're still inside their gates. We've got to get moving." Quickly he outlined his plan.

The two U.N.C.L.E. operatives dumped the guards, plus their cameras and gadget bags, behind the heavy chest. First, however, Solo took a small, flat plastic box from under his collection of potato chip sacks.

Gingerly he laid the plastic box on the chest corner.

"If we find anything down below, there are enough explosive gelcaps in there to take it out of action," he said.

Illya was busy peeling off the uniform blouse of the scar-eared guard. "And us right along with it?"

Solo said nothing about that disturbing possibility. They were inside the THRUSH headquarters, and how they escaped was secondary.

Quickly Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin finished their job, leaving the dazed guards in their boxer shorts and singlets behind the chest. A quick jab of an ampoule with a self-contained needle into the right bicep of each Thrushman insured

their slumber for the next four hours.

Clad in the regalia of members of the Castle Sykedon guard staff, Solo and Illya freed the wedged suit of armor from the elevator and let the doors slide shut.

For a tense quarter of a minute Solo watched the indicator board above the door. The car remained stationary.

"We might make it," he said softly. "No one's hanging on the button to call the car. Now, what floor do we want?"

He turned to the control board. At the top of the board were buttons labelled C-1, C-2 and C-3. An amber bulb glowed next to the C-1 legend, indicating the car's current position.

Illya ran a finger down the board. Below the three levels for the castle, six more floors were indicated by numerals in descending order. There were three more buttons at the board's bottom, marked P-3, 2 and 1. Solo indicated the lowermost button.

"P for submarine pen, do you suppose?" He gave a punch. The car whined and dropped.

Silence, interrupted only by the motorized murmur of the elevator cables. The amber lights glowed in sequence down the board.

Solo took a firmer grip on the gun which he'd lifted from the guard. Illya wiped his upper lip.

"I don't like the feel of this, Napoleon. It's all too easy."

Solo felt his uniform pocket to make certain he'd brought the plastic box of explosive gelcaps. The light for level P-2 went out. The one for P-1 lit. With a gentle whir, the cage stopped and the doors opened.

Illya Kuryakin thumbed the *Door Open* stud, held it. Both U.N.C.L.E. agents gaped.

High over their heads soared an arched ceiling carved and blasted from the green-shot gray stone of the Cornish cliffs. This roof was braced in strategic places by towering steel beams of a bright rust-red finish. The footings of the steel super-structure were set in thick concrete which stretched away before them, forming a huge T-shaped platform.

As they edged out of the elevator, the two U.N.C.L.E. agents were in a position approximately at the center of the crossbar of the T. Ahead, like a pier, the stem of the T stretched out into a huge natural basin filled with quietly lapping dark water. On their left alongside this pier, moored down with a dozen foot-thick lines, rode the most bizarre seacraft they had ever seen.

"I think," Napoleon Solo softly said, "we've discovered the white whale."

The incredible low-slung metal craft was painted a very light shade of gray. Only in barest outline did it resemble a conventional submarine. Its length was three to four

times that of an ordinary sub. Its conning tower was little more than a streamlined blister rising about a foot or so above the dorsal surface.

Along the sides of the craft, from bow to stern, rows of large, oval viewports ran just above the waterline. The ports were made of dark green glass or some similar material, opaque and reflecting the shaded lights dangling from the rocky ceiling of the pen.

Catwalks and ladderways crisscrossed above them. Empty. The entire place was lifeless, soundless except for the whispering splash of water against the hull of the monster submarine. Far down past the sub's bow they saw a tall arched opening in the cave wall. The opening was barred by a thick steel grill which rose from the water. Beyond the grill, darkness. Solo was sure the far end of that black channel opened at sea.

He slipped the plastic box from his pocket. "Care to try a little harpooning?"

"I can think of more relaxing diversions," Illya replied under his breath. "Napoleon, this is too pat. They surely know we haven't left the castle—"

"I agree. But we've come this far and the odds are bad against getting out, so we should take the sub out of action while we can. Come on."

The agents walked quickly down the stone quay. Their borrowed boots clacked. Solo stuffed the gun

in his leather belt, carefully opened the plastic box and removed one of the explosive gelcaps from its bed of special cushioning material. They were now at a point on the quay midway between bow and stern of the sub. Illya pointed at the dorsal blister.

"That hatch doesn't look secure," he said. "Shall we go aboard before we blow her?"

Solo shrugged, juggling the cap delicately in his palm. "With this much fat in the fire, a little more won't hurt."

They jumped across to the hull of the sub.

Illya Kuryakin knelt, slipped his fingers under the hatch, lifted. A moment later he pulled his head back from the hatch interior.

"There's a ladder down into some sort of control room."

Solo signed for him to go ahead. Illya disappeared. Solo put a leg over, handicapped because he could only use his right hand. In his left he carried the highly sensitive capsule of explosive.

The gloom of the ladderway closed around him. Illya landed below with a light thump. Solo sent

his right foot down to the next rung of the ladder. Suddenly he felt his sole skid, heard Illya's warning a fraction late: "Watch out for that third rung. There's a smear of oil or grease on—"

Solo's right foot slid off the rung. He grabbed for a rung above to check his fall. He was jerked up short. The violent pull made the fingers of his left hand open. The explosive capsule popped out into a high arc.

Hanging from the ladder, green with fear, Solo watched the capsule drop.

"Illya, catch it!" he choked out, watching the little football-shaped pill drop end over end, down and down with a kind of horrific slow-motion movement.

Illya jerked his head up, saw the falling capsule, extended his hands. The capsule sailed past his fingertips. Solo braced for the shattering explosion. He heard another thump, looked down.

Illya was lying on his spine, having tumbled himself underneath the capsule once he missed it. He'd shot up his right hand to catch the pellet just in time.

Solo felt his heart slow down from its frantic thudding pace. He dangled from the ladder, got his feet back on solid steel, completed his climb to the deck.

Tall panels of instruments covered the walls of the chamber, which was perhaps twenty feet long and half as wide. A highly futuristic-looking periscope device hung from over their heads. The instruments and dials equipment were baffling, indicating an advanced state of the art.

"Here," Illya said, cheeks slicked with sweat, "you hold the baby." He handed over the gelcap.

Solo jerked a thumb at the forward bulkhead. "Let's explore that way. I'm curious to see the rest of this floating nightmare."

"We shall be very happy to give you a guided tour, Mr. Solo. Welcome aboard."

The sepulchral voice drove fear like needles into Solo's belly. The voice echoed from all around them, issuing from several concealed stereo speakers. Abruptly, tiny lights on the instrument consoles began to flicker.

Underfoot Solo felt a tingling. The air filled with a low, powerful hum. Illya's eyes rounded with recognition:

"I recognize that voice, Napoleon. It belongs to Commander Ahab."

Even as Illya spoke, a section of bulkhead slid aside to reveal a forty-inch television screen on which glowed a picture whose sharp blacks and crisp whites indicated a live pickup. The screen showed a man with a spade beard seated in a sleekly modern chair. The man wore some kind of dark velveteen lounging coat. Behind him was an oval viewport against which water lapped gently.

Commander Victor Ahab looked out from the screen and said cheerfully, "We are delighted to have both you gentlemen aboard our vessel. The craft carries a THRUSH registration number, of course, but I prefer the name *Moby Dick*. A harmless little conceit. Incidentally, I am speaking to you from my personal command post forward. You will be brought here presently. First, however, I would appreciate it, Mr. Solo—so nice to meet you at long last—if you would hand the explosive device you are carrying to the crew member who is just now coming to take it from you."

The aft bulkhead opened with a whirring of motorized latches. A burly THRUSH seaman in a trim black blouse and trousers entered. Overhead, men ran on the deck-plates of the sub. The atmosphere of tension heightened.

Three other seamen followed the first into the compartment. Lights came on behind concealed brackets. The seaman in the lead watched Solo's right hand and kept his distance.

"No bravado, please, Solo," Captain Ahab boomed from the screen. "You could toss the pill and blow us all up, but you would be a member of the party. Escape is impossible. There is a powerful magnet under the deck on which you are standing. Special metal plates are built into the soles of the boots you so rudely stole from one of my men. This clever little device gives us perfect control of our crew. Submarines tend to grow unstable after long undersea voyages. Well, Solo? Why do you hesitate. Run!"

Captain Ahab's voice was thick with derision. Solo slashed his free hand across his brow to clear the sweat from his eyes. He made an effort to move his right leg, then his left.

His boots were locked tight to the floor.

Still he clutched the explosive capsule, hesitating.

"The pseudo heroics of you U.N.C.L.E. people nauseate me," Ahab said, scowling.

Illya's lips were white. "Still, Commander, we can destroy you if we choose."

Ahab reached off screen. He picked up what appeared to be a canned sardine, tipped his head back and ingested the morsel in a gulp. "Ah, Kuryakin, of course you can. But I do not believe you will. First, there is your natural instinct for self-preservation. Second, and more important, I am sure both you and Mr. Solo are intensely curious as to why we allowed you to penetrate this project base to this point.

"After all, we were reasonably certain as to who you were the moment you passed the Castle entrance booth. We have been monitoring you with concealed audio and video pickups every step of the way. We deliberately cleared the sub pen of personnel so that you

would come aboard. Don't you wonder why?"

He made a flashy gesture to emphasize his rhetorical question, went on: "Of course you do! And the only way in which you can both find out is for you, Mr. Solo, to put down that wretched bomb and join me in my quarters."

Solo's fingers were slippery with perspiration. One toss of the explosive cap and that would be it. But Ahab had damnably piqued his curiosity.

Swallowing, hoping blindly that somehow he and Illya would eventually be able to negotiate a way out of this trap, Solo closed thumb and index finger around the gelcap and extended his arm to the nearest seaman.

"You win, Ahab. Your magnets and your psychology are too much."

The seaman slid his palm under Napoleon Solo's hand. Solo opened his fingers. The gelcap dropped. The other THRUSH sailors in the chamber exhaled with relief.

Solo felt the tingling stop beneath his feet. He discovered he could move his legs. Overhead feet pounded again. Men bawled orders.

"Naturally we are superior to you, Mr. Solo," Ahab said, jovial now. "For too many years, THRUSH has operated from a position of weakness. But we were bound to succeed. Our secret—THRUSH's secret, if you will—is simply this." Commander Ahab beetled his brows in a caricature of confidence. "We're only number two, Mr. Solo. We try harder."

Commander Ahab barked a command. Seamen swarmed around the pair of U.N.C.L.E. agents and marched them to the forward bulkhead. They were led through complex instrument control rooms jammed with other THRUSH sailors, who had been lurking quietly aboard while the trap was sprung.

By the time they were ushered into Commander Ahab's personal quarters at the bow of the monster submarine, a rumble of power through the hull told Illya and Solo that their fortunes had just taken another dive.

The *Moby Dick* was putting out to sea.

ACT III

A DROWNING DAY FOR LONDON TOWN

COMMANDER VICTOR Ahab poised the ladle over the gleaming solid silver tureen.

"More lobster Newburg, Mr. Solo?"

Napoleon Solo suppressed a shudder. He was seated opposite Commander Ahab at a good-sized dining table in the latter's quarters. To his right, Illya slouched in a chair, most of his food left untasted.

Solo felt wretched. He and Illya had been jammed into small cells

overnight, unable to talk to each other, alone with their thoughts while the atomic engines of the *Moby Dick* thrummed all around them. Solo had finally managed to drift off to sleep around five in the morning. He was wakened forty-five minutes later by a siren he was sure Ahab had turned on for the sole purpose of fraying his nerves even more.

He'd been given no soap, no chance to shave. His skin felt grubby. His beard was sprouting. Commander Ahab, by contrast, was freshly tonsured, smartly attired in a white naval dress uniform with a cluster of gaudy THRUSH ribbons on the left bosom. He presided cheerfully over the breakfast table to which the U.N.C.L.E. agents had been led by guards.

"I don't think our friends care for our hospitality," said the fourth guest at the table.

"Alas, no, Cleo my sweet," said Commander Ahab, attacking a lobster claw with stainless steel crackers.

Miss Cleo St. Cloud looked quite attractive in tight-fitting gold lamé slacks and blouse. She was smoking a cigarette in a long holder and watching the captives with amusement.

Cleo sat with her back toward the sharp angle formed by the bow-plates of the gigantic sub. Looking past her shining blonde head, Solo could see two of those large, dark green viewports which revealed the churning darkness of the ocean. It was morning, but the sub was evidently so far down that sunlight could not penetrate.

"Surely you will have a spot of breakfast juice at least, Mr. Kuryakin?" Ahab asked.

Illya cocked a sour eye at a pitcher of clam broth. "I eat nothing but peanut butter and jelly in the morning, thanks all the same."

Cleo exhaled smoke. "I'd eat hearty, darlings. Especially you, Mr. Solo. Ahab has a little task in store for you this morning."

Ahab got up, wiping his lips with an oversized white napkin. He went to a chart table and consulted a large map.

"That's quite correct, Mr. Solo. We should be reaching our rendezvous point within ten minutes." He turned, rubbing his pudgy hands together. "And then—the beginning of the end for the enemies of THRUSH."

Pushing his chair back, Solo stood up, stretched. A seaman stationed near the bulkhead lifted his short-muzzled power rifle to firing position. Irritably, Solo waved him away, walked to the forward viewports. A pearl-gray fish of unusual size nosed up on the other side. It regarded Solo with a sorrowful eye, then flicked its tail and shot out of sight.

Solo said: "I don't want any fried shrimp, stewed oysters or diced eel, Ahab. But I would like some information."

Commander Ahab stroked his beard. "I suppose that would be in order. Appreciating the totality of our plan will heighten your feeling of dismay as we carry it out. Very well. Ask."

"First of all—" Solo gestured to the foaming sea outside "—where are we?"

"Somewhere under the North Atlantic. Exactly where needn't trouble you. Next question?" said Commander Ahab.

"What's the reason behind this elaborate floating cigar?"

Ahab chortled. "Floating cigar indeed! The *Moby Dick* has been in construction for better than three years. It is a mobile operations base from which we shall put to use certain principles of oceanographic knowledge discovered and applied by various members of the THRUSH research wing.

"Poor Dr. Shelley, by the way, apparently had done some research along parallel lines, and had also collected scraps of data which made him suspect that we were going in the same general direction. Our preliminary tests couldn't be carried out in complete secrecy, you know. We did disturb the ocean here and there. At any rate, we have perfected a means to quickly and drastically alter major ocean currents. When explosive charges are placed at the proper depths and positions on the ocean floor, and exploded simultaneously, the result is the instantaneous creation of tidal

waves of staggering size and destructive power.

"The one we sent in a vain attempt to rescue Naglesmith—he was supposed to rendezvous with the *Moby Dick,* you see—was an infant compared to the one we are preparing now."

Ahab's manner was easy and conversational but his eyes were full of the bright, fanatic glitter of the dedicated THRUSH officer determined to attack civilization at its foundations, and destroy it.

Ahab crossed the plush ivory carpet to the chart table, returning with the oceanographic map he had consulted earlier. He pointed to a number of bright red crosses on the map.

"Here, here and here our divers will plant charges necessary to create a tidal wave of such immense proportions that it can easily sweep up the Thames River and destroy all of London and the countryside round about for a radius of fifty miles. Once the charges are set, we

shall sail back to England and detonate them. When London is inundated and all its inhabitants drowned, THRUSH Central will hand a letter of ultimatum to all the major governments of the world. The letter will demand immediate surrender. This time we shall achieve our goal."

Ahab smiled good-humoredly. He was about to continue when Illya sat up. The thrumming had stopped.

Rather excitedly, Cleo St. Cloud leaned forward. "The engines are out."

"And the divers will be starting down. Well, Mr. Solo, now comes your moments of glory."

Once more Ahab tapped the chart. This time he indicated a cross that was not scarlet, but black.

"This is the reason we allowed you and Mr. Kuryakin to come aboard the *Moby Dick*. This mark. Just here, a charge must be placed —a key charge—at such a depth that the man who places it will very likely perish. Congratulations, Mr. Solo!" Ahab rolled up the chart and gestured. "You have been chosen! My men are standing by with your diving suit and the explosive package."

Solo scowled. "I didn't raise my hand, teacher."

Still grinning merrily, Ahab snapped his fingers. The seaman turned down a rheostat, plunging the chamber into semi-darkness. The only illumination was a faint phosphorescent gleam cast by the sea water lapping at the viewports.

Cleo St. Cloud picked up a small, silvered pencil-like affair. She touched a stud which started a purple bulb in the tip to winking at half-second intervals.

"Miss St. Cloud has ways of overcoming your reluctance, Mr. Solo," Ahab said. "That is why I invited her along for the voyage. Guard! Hold Mr. Kuryakin near the door so that he does not interfere."

The guard leaped forward, jammed his power-rifle into Illya's shoulder blades and jerked his head to indicate that Illya should follow. Illya tossed his napkin aside, hesitated as though ready to start swinging. Solo blinked once, very fast. Illya caught the signal, contained his anger. Solo had called the shot. They would try to ride it out a bit longer.

Illya accompanied the guard. Ahab walked around in front of Solo. "Please." He indicated an easy chair. "Be so good as to sit down."

"All of a sudden, Ahab, I'm not feeling very polite."

Ahab's face flushed. With surprising power, he jabbed his fingers hard at Solo's chest while Cleo, sneaking around from behind, shoved the chair forward so that it struck Solo's legs from behind. He sat down abruptly.

Iron bands snapped out from the body of the chair to pinion his arms

and legs. He writhed, heard Ahab chuckling. The purple light floated near in the gloom.

Somewhere out beyond the blinking purple pinpoint, Cleo St. Cloud murmured, "Relax, Mr. Solo. Just let yourself relax. All we're going to do is relax you to the point where you'll be willing to follow Victor's orders through a headset."

"Your act is lousy, dear," Solo said. But he didn't feel confident. He remembered the glazed, mindless look on Illya's face in the Golder's Green lab. He braced for an ordeal.

"Cleo won't fail me," Ahab said out of the dark. "Not if she wants to see London again."

Solo's arms ached from the constriction of the steel bands. His forehead and cheeks felt clammy.

The tiny purple bulb seemed to swell in size, sending out star-like rays. Solo realized the starry effect was the result of his eyes watering. Already he was having trouble concentrating on anything except the blinking light.

Soothingly Cleo's voice reached him:

"Mr. Solo—may I call you something a little less formal? Napoleon. That's better. You're quite a charming man. You would do well as a member of the THRUSH team. Pity you're not with us. Still, the two of us can be friends, can't we? Nothing but trust between us, Napoleon my dear.

"Once you trust me, you'll realize that all this is for the best. You'll feel so much better if you relax and quit wrenching around in your chair that way. Victor told you the mission was dangerous, didn't he? Of course it is. But it needn't be fatal. No, not at all. Provided you obey instructions carefully, you have an excellent chance of coming out alive.

"Naturally you won't be able to obey instructions if you continue to fight against us. You must stop fighting. You must let your muscles relax. That's the first of the important steps, my sweet Napoleon. Relax. Then sleep. *Relax and sleep—"*

Somewhere, faintly, another voice drifted. "Give her the raspberry, Napoleon."

Illya had hardly uttered the words when Solo heard a thud, a groan, a slumping sound.

"Don't let him interrupt us again," Ahab snarled.

Solo was growing drowsy. He wanted to say something to Cleo St. Cloud. Something smart, needling. Anything to show her that his mind was his own, unresponsive.

That purple light—how restful it was. Going off, then coming alight with a soft blaze, like a flower blooming in silence.

His upper arms tingled. Vaguely he sensed that Cleo St. Cloud was talking to him. Actually she hadn't stopped. It was like living in a house beside a waterfall. After five years

the splash no longer bothered you. He'd been listening to Cleo for at least ten—

On and off went the purple light, blossoming, blossoming. *On and off, on and off—*

"Yes, Napoleon my dear, yes, that's it. *Relax and sleep, relax and sleep—*"

A dim corner of his mind rebelled.

The purple light was soothing. But they were going to send him out into the ocean's depth to plant a bomb that would help create a tidal wave to destroy London, England. Desperately his mind tried to erect a wall against the soothing-syrup of her voice.

How many human beings in London? he asked himself with the small, still-alert part of his mind. Four million? Five? He wasn't sure. He tried to think of them as all dead. One by one he began to count macabre bodies floating over a fence.

One dead.

Two dead.

Ten dead.

Hundreds, thousands, millions dead if he let her win—

Blink blink blink went the purple light, so softly, so subtly, so treacherously.

A guttural male voice: "Is he responding?" Doggedly Solo counted corpses in his mind.

"Sssh! I think so. He's difficult. A minute longer. Then I'll have him."

He heard the rustle of her gold slacks as she eased nearer. Cool fingers tested the pulse of his left wrist. The purple light was inches from his eyes, on and off, *on and off—*

"Relax, dear sweet Napoleon. Relax, let your mind and your body respond only to me. *Relax and respond to me—*"

He'd run out of mental steam trying to count the dead bodies that would haunt him if he failed. His whole brain felt like a sponge, soaking up soothing sounds and purple lights. She had him. The whispering witch had him. *He was about to go under, he—*

Suddenly there was an absence of pressure.

She had taken her fingers from his wrist.

In the dark Napoleon Solo gambled.

He curled the fingers of his right hand under and jammed his nails into his palm as hard as he could, digging, *digging—*

Pain lanced along his nerves. He stared straight into the purple light, head lolling to one side, eyes barely open, mere slits.

Abruptly the purple light snapped out.

Footsteps moved. A man's voice, a woman's, then both, whispering together in a guarded conversation he could not hear. Sweat trickled coldly down into his collar. He kept scratching his right palm to jolt himself with fresh waves of stinging pain.

There was a whine, a snap of a switch going down. Solo didn't dare move. He tried to open his eyelids a fraction more, turned his pupils toward the sound of Ahab's heavy breathing. Amplified, a flat male voice said, "Yes, Commander?"

"Stand by with the diving gear. Mr. Solo is under control and ready to go."

Sitting heavy-lidded, Napoleon Solo stared at the carpet.

Briskly, Cleo said, "Mr. Solo, you will obey Commander Ahab's instructions and only Commander Ahab's, whether delivered in person or via a microphone and headset receiver. You will do this starting the moment I count three and clap my hands twice. Furthermore, you will be agreeable. You won't struggle or try to fight or escape." She paused. "Very well, Mr. Solo. One. Two. *Three.*"

Sound of palms cracking together once, twice. Solo affected a silly smile and opened his eyes.

"I'm hungry," he said with a cheerful grin.

Commander Ahab bustled up, touched the chair's back. The steel bands retracted with spanging sounds.

"Sorry, no time for that now, Mr. Solo. We must get you into your gear and on your way."

Tractably Solo allowed himself to be led toward the entrance to the chamber. Illya Kuryakin slumped against the wall, the ugly purple bruise on his forehead showing where he had been clubbed. As Solo passed, Illya gave him a searching look. Solo raised his right hand and wriggled his fingers in the air.

"Hello there."

Illya looked ill as Solo stepped through the hatch.

Moments later Solo was shoved down a ladder into a large, steel-walled room where half a dozen THRUSH seamen manhandled him into a cumbersome diving suit. A diving helmet was lowered and dogged down. The inside of the suit smelled vaguely of fish. Solo's field of vision was restricted. THRUSH sailors criss-crossed it, carrying air hoses.

His head was jarred as the sea-

men jerked the helmet one way, then another, attaching the hoses. Ahab appeared. He had a combination earphone-mike on his head, the mike a tiny black sphere at the end of a curving piece of stainless steel which swept around from his ear to just in front of his lips. Ahab held up a small, flat, shallow package with a metal clip attached.

"Explosive. Very powerful, Mr. Solo." Ahab's words crackled through the diving suit headset. "I will fasten it securely to your belt, thus."

The package was clipped in place.

"Attached to the package is a special trigger-release weight. You will have no trouble feeling the stud which activates the weight. I will tell you when to press the stud. You will be going down quite a long distance, and when you reach the proper level, we will give you further instructions.

"Follow them to the letter, Mr. Solo. The placement of this particular charge is extremely critical. An error of even a few feet could upset calculations. We trust the pressure to which you descend will not prove fatal, but if it does—ah, well, you have given your life to a good cause."

That's one cause, Solo thought as he grunted a monosyllabic reply, that won't get any help this trip.

He'd fooled them.

His right hand, inside the suit's glove, still stung. But he had managed to hold out against Cleo St. Cloud. He hoped Illya could take care of himself, escape somehow. Illya would be going it alone now. Solo knew, as he was shoved forward to an open hatch, that his trip would probably be one way.

He was going to place the explosive packet in the wrong location if it killed him. As it very likely would.

The THRUSH seamen pushed him into an oval chamber, then sealed its inner hatch. Water began to rise, foaming dark around his boots. Solo turned clumsily, noting that his air hoses were paying out through the otherwise sealed hatch, running out through specially gasketed steel ring brackets.

The water rose past his faceplate. Evidently activated by the agitation of the sea water pouring in, a powerful lamp flashed on at the top of his helmet. The outer hatchway opened.

"Forward, Mr. Solo!" Ahab said in the headset. "Over the threshold and down to Davey Jones." Ahab's voice carried a malicious edge.

Manfully Solo moved ahead. Once away from the steel hull of the *Moby Dick* he dropped at a slow but steady rate. Out of the deepening watery gloom something long, bullet-shaped and finned flashed at him. Solo slung himself to one side.

The monster fish flashed on by, snapping its mouth shut on a disturbing display of sharp teeth. The

gloom of the deeps closed around him again, shading off from purplish green to total black.

The beam of his head lamp revealed little. He had distressing visions of fanged fish hovering nearby, waiting to make a snack of him. He began whistling *Minnie the Mermaid,* hoping Ahab was listening.

Sure enough, he was: "The pitiful dupe! He's whistling a bawdy sea song. Cleo my dear, you gave an inspired performance."

All this was aside, not meant for Solo, who was surrounded by watery darkness and beginning to find it difficult to maintain a mood of levity. He was troubled by fear of what would happen if he failed; fear of the tremendous psychological advantage the tidal wave technique would give to THRUSH; fear, at the last, of his own death, down here in the primordial ghostliness of the sea, alone, powerless, small.

Then he began to understand Ahab's earlier remarks about the riskiness of this mission. Inside his suit, seeming to issue from behind him, he heard slight tearing sound. Slight, but loud in his ears as a butcher knife slashing canvas.

Immediately the air he was breathing seemed thinner, malodorous. He began to breathe more loudly than before. His lungs hurt.

"Solo!" Ahab said. "The pressure indicator is behaving oddly."

"Air—beginning to smell bad coming into the suit," he said in a flat voice.

Over the headset Solo heard someone in the sub say that he was nearly to demolition depth. He also caught a snatch of a sentence ending with the words *pop like a balloon.*

His ears had developed a ringing. Pale blue spots danced behind his eyes. Was the crushing pressure slowly ripping through the multilayered suit? He was still descending, but through total blackness, except where the headlamp speared.

The soles of his diving boots crunched against something solid. Solo bent his head downward. The spotlight illuminated a dark, wetly green rock shelf on which he had come to rest. Ahab spoke again:

"Mr. Solo, can you hear me?"

Solo grunted that he could.

"Very well. Listen carefully. You will turn to your right. Repeat, to your right. Tell me what you have executed a ninety-degree right turn."

Swallowing to drive the blue dancing spots away, Solo turned ninety degrees.

To the left.

"I've turned," he croaked. His throat felt clogged with foul air.

"Now you will walk fourteen paces straight ahead. Each pace will be measured thus. Put your right foot down. That is a pace. Move your left foot so that the heel rests against the toe of your right. That is your second pace. So on.

Report as soon as you have completed the maneuver."

Carefully Solo followed the instructions. He was growing dizzy and weak. Seven paces.

Eight.

Nine.

Ten—then thirteen—and fourteen.

"I've taken fourteen paces." His voice sounded rougher than ever.

"All right. Now remove the explosive packet from your waist. Report when you have done so."

Solo did.

"Now feel its left end until you have located the stud which activates the trigger-release weight."

Again Solo obeyed. Mixed with his swirly-headed feeling of impending death was the knowledge that he'd foxed Commander Ahab at last, and that THRUSH's careful calculations would be thrown awry. Perhaps the tidal wave would simply spend itself in the Channel now. Solo had no way of knowing. Nor did he care. He had done all he could.

Ahab again: "Mr. Solo, on my command and not before, you will press the stud and immediately let go of the explosive packet, allowing it to sink straight down. However, before we begin that very critical operation—"

Another jagged ripping sound inside the suit. Solo barked, "Something else just gave, Ahab."

"Why, Mr. Solo, you sound concerned. Trust me. I want you to speak to a friend of yours. Mr. Kuryakin is standing at my elbow. Mr. Kuryakin, kindly describe your position to Mr. Solo."

Over the crackling connection came Illya's gloomy voice: "I'm afraid Miss St. Cloud is holding a revolver against the back of my head, Napoleon."

Deep in Solo's belly fear tightened its hold. Ahab returned:

"I cannot describe what exquisite chastisement poor Cleo will receive for bungling your hypnosis, Mr. Solo. But frankly, I am surprised at you. Did you think we would send you down there without track-

ing you? We have been watching you on scan scopes all the way."

His voice harshened: "I congratulate you on a most excellent job of dissembling. You fooled me, and Miss St. Cloud is going to suffer for it, I don't mind telling you. Unless you instantly turn around one hundred eighty degrees, a full turn, walk twenty-eight paces back and signal that you are in the correct position—we are watching you, remember—I am going to have Mr. Kuryakin shot."

Numbed with a sense of failure, Solo hesitated. Blue dots danced furiously on his retinas.

Suddenly Illya shouted, "Napoleon, drop the cursed thing right there! Don't listen to—"

A thudding sound, another groan as Illya was forcibly removed from the microphone. For one moment Solo's torment was complete. Loyalty to U.N.C.L.E. fought with loyalty to his friend.

And friendship won, because there still danced in Solo's mind the crazy will-of-the-wisp hope that there might be another way. There *had* to be another way. He couldn't let Illya be killed.

Napoleon Solo turned and paced off the twenty-eight steps.

"That's a little more like it," Ahab rumbled. "The scope shows you precisely in position. Touch the stud and release the package."

With a feeling of horror Solo carried out the act. Weight was gone from his hand.

The air inside the suit was becoming unbearably foul. He was going to pass out. He took an involuntary step and nearly tumbled off the rock shelf into an abyss of water. The lurching movement produced another ripping noise, louder than the first two. Then came a loud hiss.

"By all rights," Ahab's voice boomed into his ears, "I should let you remain down there to die, Mr. Solo. But you have aroused my anger, and that is not done with impunity, I assure you.

"I think it would be more suitable if you came back aboard the *Moby Dick* and we took you to London, to be an eyewitness to your own handiwork. But that doesn't mean we can't give you a sharp lesson on your return trip. You men on the power winches! Bring him up at twice the safe speed."

Without warning Solo was jerked from overhead. He went sailing up through the dark water. He yelled a curse over the headset, but it came out a scrambled gurgle. His tongue bulged in his throat. His eyes hurt as though needles pierced them. His guts churned as the pressure decreased, decreased, too fast—

Five minutes later Solo lay on the carpet in Commander Ahab's private quarters. He writhed, arching his back and gasping for air like a beached fish. He could barely see as Ahab towered over him and delivered a vicious kick to his ribs,

rolling him over and forcing a wild yell of pain out between his teeth.

Into the distorted crazy-mirror of Solo's vision Commander Ahab dragged someone else. It was Cleo St. Cloud, sobbing and mopping at her bloodied nose with a handkerchief. One eye was already darkening.

Commander Ahab knotted his fist in her hair, and shook her back and forth like a doll. He alternated this sport with a few more crashes of his boot-tip against Solo's midsection. Ahab choked: "There is only—one master aboard—the *Moby Dick*. Perhaps you have learned that—by—*now*—"

A thin line of blood dribbled out of Solo's mouth, down his chin. He felt as though his body would explode.

He'd failed.

Napoleon Solo spun off toward darkness. Before he went the whole distance, he heard a sound.

The *Moby Dick's* atomic engines were thrumming. The sub was on its way back to England.

Solo was slipping down a long slide into the biggest dark that had ever swallowed him. In his pain-ridden mind he heard a tune, crazy, as though played on a flute.

London Bridge is falling down, falling down—drowned in ten million tons of water.

Solo saw the wave rise up. It smashed against him, driving him all the way down the slide, to nothing.

TWO

MISS CLEO ST. CLOUD looked bad. Displaying her black eye, plus a sticking plaster over the bridge of her nose, she sat up front beside the chauffeur in Ahab's big Daimler as it sped into London. A soupy gray dawn was breaking over the city.

The *Moby Dick* had surfaced off the coast during the night. It was met by two rubber raft-loads of THRUSH agents. Ahab's car waited on the lonely little coast road where they had landed. The *Moby Dick* slipped out to sea again, a gray-white phantom whose dim blue running lights sank under the roiled water of the Channel.

They had taken back roads to the city, Solo and Illya in the spacious tonneau with Commander Ahab beside them. Two THRUSH agents in bowlers sat on the jump seats facing them. Each held a pistol pointed at one of the U.N.C.L.E. agents.

The Daimler nosed through the thick fog, narrowly missing an oncoming taxicab. The cab driver leaned on his horn. It blatted as he skidded on past them, then faded in the murk. Commander Ahab, who had been complaining of a sore throat, sprayed his palate noisily with a golden atomizer. He put the atomizer away and slapped his knee, again the soul of cheerfulness.

"Well, Mr. Solo, it won't be long

now. You have quite a treat in store. The spectacle of London inundated should be thrilling, especially since we shall be observing it from an altitude of better than ten thousand feet."

Illya cocked an eyebrow. He looked paler than usual. His face was badly bruised. His thin fingers drummed against his trousers. "We're going up to watch in an airplane, are we?"

"Precisely," Ahab returned. "We'll take my private turbojet. We should arrive at the field in another twenty minutes. Allow me to bring you up to date, Mr. Solo, since you didn't regain consciousness until we were halfway to London."

Solo said nothing. His eyes were flicking right and left out the bullet-proof windows. The car seemed to be rolling through some kind of district of small shops. In the fog it was hard to tell exactly. A few electric lamps burned behind smudged plate glass windows.

Solo's belly growled emptily. He ached from end to end. Now and again he experienced double vision. One rib might or might not be cracked. Ahab was leaning forward on the seat.

For no reason, he jabbed Solo in the ribs. Solo groaned, restrained an impulse to start swinging. Time was running out. Heroics would gain them nothing. One or the other of them had to escape from the car before it reached the private THRUSH airfield.

Ahab hadn't stopped speaking: "Splendid timing, don't you think? The detonation of the underwater charges is set for 4:30 this afternoon, just as the homeward rush begins. Can't you see the good burghers of London wiggling and squiggling in panic, trying to jam the tubes and the trains, when suddenly, *splash!*" Eyes rolling a trifle maniacally, Ahab closed his fist. "Water, water, water! It's not every day a man destroys a symbol of civilization."

Levelly Napoleon Solo said, "You, Commander, are an unspeakable maniac. Like every member of THRUSH."

The commander's upper lip began to tremble. He was on the point of striking Solo when the driver of the Daimler cursed and hit the horn. The car slewed wildly.

From a narrow, murky cross street, a dairy van had pulled out suddenly. The Daimler's brakes locked as the driver desperately tried to cut around past the van's hood. The rear tires squealed, skidding—

"Too fast!" Ahab burst out, losing control. "Too fast in this fog, you fool!"

The wrath he had been about to vent on Solo become focused on the driver, in the form of a wild, lashing blow of his fist against the back of the man's neck. From that point on the driver never had a chance.

There was a crash, a wrenching

of metal, a second, louder crash, the sound of glass smashing. The Daimler's right rear end suddenly elevated. The bowler-hatted THRUSH agent on the right side of the tonneau peered out.

"Gawd 'elp us! Turned over the blinkin' milk wagon. And we're 'ung up on 'is front bumper to boot."

Commander Ahab whipped out a pistol, pressed it against Solo's side.

"Out, both of you. We'll lift the car free. Hadkins, you and Blightsome go first. Get out here on the left. And no funny business, Mr. Solo, or I'll splatter your skull all over the cobbles."

The two THRUSH agents climbed out. Then Ahab unlimbered himself. Solo watched Illya move out next. While the slender agent momentarily cut off Ahab's view, Solo quickly mouthed the single word *Go.*

Illya's eyebrows quirked as he bent to get out of the car. His expression indicated his reluctance to leave his friend. Solo repeated the single syllable silently, pushing Illya ahead of him.

A couple of curious early risers watched from down the sidewalk. Otherwise the street of shops was quiet. Quiet, that is, save for the outraged screams of the dairy van driver.

His vehicle had been turned over on its right side. Milk and cream flowed through broken glass all over the street. And from the left, upward side of the van rose the driver himself, portly, red-faced, his tweed cap askew and his wattles quivering:

"Lousy stinking swells in yer big cars!" he yelled, knocking a big smear of butter off the point of his chin. "Been out all night partyin', 'ave yer? 'oo's goin' to pay fer all my goods, answer me that? You are, fuzzy-whiskers, you are!"

Under the goading of the concealed guns of Messrs. Hadkins and Blightsome, Solo and Illya were laboring to lift the right rear fender off its hang-up on the upthrust point of the van's bumper. They grunted, heaved, grunted, heaved. A bobby's whistle sounded in the fog somewhere as Ahab shouted at the truck driver, "Be quiet, you insufferable pig!"

"Pig, am I?" howled the driver. He flung a couple of pound chunks of butter at his tormentor.

At that moment Napoleon Solo lurched against the THRUSH agent named Blightsome, simultaneously heaving with all his might on the fender.

Down came the Daimler's weight, released, onto Blightsome's foot.

The man howled. Solo whirled, gut-chopped the other THRUSH agent, just as Commander Ahab lost his temper completely, pulled his pistol and shot the dairy driver in the shoulder.

Solo shoved Illya hard in the

spine, turned to fend off the attack of the first THRUSH man he'd hit. Illya hesitated only an instant. He leaped up on the van, jumped down on the other side and was gone into the murk.

The first THRUSH agent smashed Solo in the nose with his gun barrel, staggering him. On his knees, Solo took another blow in the neck.

"Get after Kuryakin!" Ahab cried, apoplectic. The THRUSH gunmen hesitated. Their reason was evident. From the rear the bobby's footsteps clacked at them in a dead run.

Ahab heard this, hastily ordered them all into the Daimler as the bobby's whistle split the morning air again. Solo tried to pull away. Ahab kicked him in the leg and threw him on his face in the tonneau.

The THRUSH agents dragged Solo's legs into the car as it gathered speed, snaked around past the wrecked van and raced away into the fog. Somewhere Ahab was cursing:

"Kuryakin's loose. Loose! Well, we can't let that stop us. Too much at stake. They'll never believe him anyway. Never in time. We'll go ahead. We must. Ah, you—causing me all this difficulty!"

He jammed his sole against Solo's head. "I should put your light out now, Solo. But you've earned a much more painful death. Besides, no matter what Kuryakin does, it won't help. Why, 4:30 will be here before they know it." Ahab began to titter, somewhat crazily.

Groggy and nauseated, Solo lay on the floorboards of the racing car. He hoped Illya would make it. He hoped something could be done in time. But he was worried that Ahab was right: Then it was already too late.

Commander Ahab settled down and, as if he needed a scapegoat for all of the things that had gone wrong, instructed his two agents to work Solo over thoroughly. They beat him with the indifference of professionals, all the way to the THRUSH airfield.

THREE

THE HANDS on the huge clock high overhead registered two in the afternoon. All around, there was an atmosphere of tension, of men finally engaged in a battle for which they had trained for years.

One entire wall of the immense chamber consisted of frosted plexiglass panels. They were illuminated from behind. They bore on their surfaces intricate maps of various areas of the greater London area.

Small lights popped and winked over the various portions of the map like a pinball backboard gone mad. Animated arrows pointed down main thoroughfares, pulsing with light to indicate a maximum traffic flow. Underneath the great plexiglass boards, controllers, all of

them officers from the various military services of Her Majesty, sat on stools on ten-foot high motorized platforms. They called signals through headsets and watched the changing light patterns.

This was the highly top secret Program Room from which, if the time ever came, the British could unleash nuclear devastation upon an aggressor who struck first. The room was located six levels underground. Today its occupants were engaged in a strange kind of war: a war against the hands of the master clock high above them.

The clock's hands ticked over to register two minutes past the hour.

Grimly facinated, Illya Kuryakin watched the movement of the hands. He was seated in a comfortable easy chair, high up behind glass in the master programming booth overlooking the floor. The upholstery on Illya's chair was black, like that of the chair beside him in which Mr. Waverly sat.

Waverly's forehead was puckered. He kept tock-tocking his pipe stem against the lucite counter. To the right of the U.N.C.L.E. operatives, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the C.I.D. sat in red-upholstered chairs, anxiously watching floor operations.

All available members of the armed forces plus the entire London police department to a man were on the streets, directing what might become the greatest mass exodus ever attempted.

Running away from Commander Ahab's car in the morning fog, an exhausted Illya had fled for several blocks before phoning a coded U.N.C.L.E. number.

Relays had switched him to Mr. Waverly. Illya reported what was likely to happen at four-thirty in the afternoon.

An official Whitehall limousine sped out of the fog ten minutes later. It carried him to No. 10 Downing Street. From that address at shortly past eleven issued the order that all resources were to be mobilized to put into effect a defense Program left over from the days when the exodus of a city's population seemed feasible in the face of nuclear attack.

By noon bayonet-armed troops were on the streets and outward traffic was flowing sluggishly. Citizens milled in panic at the tube entrances. Nearly everyone had heard the Prime Minister's emergency broadcast alluding to a *situation of grave emergency which required orderly but instant evacuation.*

For two hours now the evacuation had been in progress. Thirty-nine gigantic TV monitors positioned on the floor of the Program Room showed London's various main traffic arteries. Each road was hopelessly clogged with motionless traffic. Eleven additional monitors relayed pictures from other main points around London. A riot was in progress outside the Parliament

Building, for example. The rioters were panic-stricken students who had no idea why they were rioting, or what they were protesting.

The Prime Minister himself had decided to put the evacuation plan, into operation. He had digested the facts presented by his aides: only a third of the population, perhaps less, could be gotten out before the THRUSH tidal wave struck at half after the hour of four. Hardly satisfactory, but better than nothing. The Prime Minister had ordered the evacuation. And it had been a bad choice.

As Illya watched with growing horror, scenes of chaos and confusion multiplied on the monitors. Up to this point the behavior of London's population had been generally both exemplary and amazing. But now, with all roads jammed and horns blasting everywhere, and still no word from the government as to the reason for the exodus, sporadic riots of serious proportions were breaking out. Many led by howling teenagers.

"It will be less than a third surviving," Illya breathed.

Mr. Waverly heard him, said, "Very likely. Our only hope is to locate the underwater craft."

Every hunter-killer sub unit in the North Atlantic, every available NATO vessel, had joined the search, with no results thus far. Illya studied the huge clock beyond the glass. It was suspended by modernistic stainless steel rods from the arched ceiling. The hands moved again, inexorable.

Illya thought of Solo. For the tenth time in an hour he reached out, jerked an olive-green phone off its prongs. Mr. Waverly watched, strain showing around the corners of his eyes.

Illya had difficulty hearing. There was a constant buzz of communications traffic in the booth. He said into the phone:

"Kuryakin here. You'll have to speak up."

"U.N.C.L.E. station three-a-one," replied a clipped voice. "We are getting feedback from our corps of agents covering the city. But so far we have nothing positive."

"How many private airfields can there be around London?" Illya barked.

"Enough to make investigation difficult, Kuryakin. Air traffic is at its peak, what with evacuation helicopters taking off everywhere. We also have no reliable way of monitoring flights. The THRUSH airplane you referred to may already be up, and the field which it used abandoned. Our agents are having trouble reaching outlying sections of the city at all. Reports are coming in, but it's taking time. The streets are a madhouse."

Illya's face wrenched. "I'm not interested in excuses—"

The duty officer interrupted: "Excuse me, Kuryakin, but please remember yourself. We have no direct evidence that the THRUSH

detonation signal will be given from the aircraft. And we have other assignments at a time like this, you know. Records to remove. Personnel to evacuate. Liaison with the government. I realize the life of Mr. Solo is important to you, but in time of crisis, well—"

He did not finish. Mr. Waverly extended a hand toward the phone, his expression asking, *Need help?* Illya shook his head. The duty officer finished: "Look, Kuryakin, I'll signal you the moment we learn anything."

"Yes. Thank you. My—apologies for blowing up."

Mr. Waverly said, "Anything promising, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya struck his fist against the arm of the chair. "No aircraft. No airfield. Nothing."

"At least," said Mr. Waverly quietly, "if the worst happens and Mr. Solo is not heard from again, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that his quick work made it possible for one of you to escape, and get this evacuation started."

Gloomily Illya Kuryakin turned to look at his superior.

"Yes, sir," he said. "You're correct in one way. But in another, it's not nearly enough."

To their right the sharp voice of the Minister of Defense called for sound from one of the TV monitors. Rumbling booms filled the booth, mingled with agonized screams.

A mob near the Abbey had started flinging homemade fire cocktails at the British armor. The armor commanders responded with warning blasts fired at the sky.

"Tell those jackasses to hold their fire," the Defense Minister shouted.

But somehow communications with the armored unit had broken down. The cannons continued to roar.

Illya stared numb. He swung his gaze down the line of monitors. Everywhere he saw mobs, chaos, fear.

The madness was spreading.

And again the clock hands moved.

Perhaps, Illya thought, *Napoleon was better off dead.*

ACT IV

THE HOUR OF THE HARPOON

AT THAT EXACT moment Napoleon Solo was seated in a lime-green lounge chair of infinite cost and luxury. Across from him, on a wide cove seat of identical color, Commander Ahab was relaxing with a whiskey and soda, craning for a view out the window. The jet was flying an erratic pattern at 33,000 feet. Thin clouds prevented all but an occasional flash of the city far below.

On Ahab's right hand, Cleo St. Cloud sat with her shoes kicked off. She was admiring her gold-painted toenails in an offhand way, as if she were part of a scheme to

butcher millions of people nearly every day of the week.

Solo's neck was clammy with perspiration. The tightly-zipped flyer's coverall was steamy. He'd found himself dressed in this garment upon awakening around noon.

"Wish we could see a bit more," Ahab commented. "Of course it may clear by signal time."

Cleo St. Cloud sniffed. "I hope some silly RAF pilot doesn't bang into us, Victor."

Ahab said, "Yes, there are quite a few planes up. Poor nitwits. Trying to evacuate the entire city of London." He glanced across at Solo. "That must be Kuryakin's work, eh?"

Solo simply shrugged.

Ever since he wakened in a plain-walled room, his mind had been clicking frantically, hunting for a way to stop the devastation that would descend upon London in a roaring, gigantic wall of water.

Commander Ahab and his cohorts had managed to elude discovery because of the unique location of their airfield. It consisted of the top three floors of a grimy warehouse covering an entire city block. Long out of business, the warehouse displayed boards where window glass had once let in sunlight.

The floors of the top two stories had been removed, providing a chamber the size of a hangar. Into this Solo was led shortly after waking up. He boarded the aircraft, a stub-winged plane with a cluster of jetpods aft and a rotor-like arrangement on top, just behind the cockpit.

From the window of the lushly appointed interior, Napoleon Solo watched the motorized roof of the ancient building roll back. Commander Ahab, already aboard, discoursed on the marvels of THRUSH, particularly the development of a vertical takeoff aircraft no larger than the conventional business or private jet.

Straight up past the rolled-back roof the sleek plane shot, straight up into thin clouds. Then the aft jet cluster took over, thrusting them forward in a normal flight attitude.

They'd been aloft for a little less than two hours now. Solo had consumed two cups of tepid tea and munched one damp, leftover cruller served by the plane's steward, a THRUSH thug with a butler's striped vest which barely concealed the pistol in the waistband of his pants. This worthy was currently guarding the entrance to the cockpit, a few paces behind where Solo was seated.

The two other THRUSH minions. Hadkins and Blightsome, relaxed in another cove-shaped lounge at the rear of the cabin. Hadkins had his gun in his lap. He was reading an illustrated motor sport publication. Blightsome, however, had done nothing but glare at Solo all the time they'd been in the air. Blightsome's foot was a clump of

white bandages, the result of Solo letting the Daimler fall on it that morning. Blightsome never let go of the butt of his pistol.

Now and then he gave Solo a humorless smirk to indicate that he was just waiting for his opportunity to enjoy a bit of revenge.

Three against one, even counting out Commander Ahab and Cleo.

Upon awakening Solo had also searched for his pocket communicator. Apparently they'd taken it from him while putting him into the flyer's coverall. He had to make a move somehow. And soon.

"I wonder—" Solo began. "My throat's getting dry."

Ahab clapped his pudgy hands. "Feeling the effects of tension at last, eh? Splendid, splendid! You U.N.C.L.E. types usually try to pretend you're constructed of stone."

Solo fixed a discouraged expression on his face. "I have a right to be tense. We've lost."

"Quite right," Ahab agreed. "Most gracious of you to admit it." He summoned the combination thug and galley attendant. "More tea for Mr. Solo, Thrasher."

"Hot this time, if you don't mind," Solo said. Now that he had decided to act, take a chance no matter how rash it might be, he felt a bit of his old aplomb returning. "The last two pots were about the same temperature as a retired vegetarian's showerbath."

Grunting at the insult, the galley man retreated behind a curtain. Solo heard the pop of a gas ring being lighted.

Pointedly, Solo stared again at the expensively veneered console panel which divided the cove seat across from him. The closed cover concealed the console's contents from view. Solo kept staring. Finally Ahab noticed.

With a flourish he touched a button. The console's lid snapped all the way back into the depths of the lounge seat, revealing a double row of bright-colored studs. Ahab's eyes sparked with pride as he waggled his fingers at the control board.

"You've guessed, haven't you, Solo? Yes, this is the center from which I shall consumate Project Ahab. However, lest you get overly ambitious, hoping to jump over here and throw several of these controls to upset things—" Ahab paused significantly. "Blightsome? Come up here, please, and keep Mr. Solo covered at close range."

The Thrushman with the round lump of bandage on his foot limped up the aisle. The private plane's jets whispered eerily. Rags of thin cloud slipped past the fuselage.

Ahab indicated a large yellow button on the console.

"This is the control which will raise the curtain on our aquatic novelty act, Mr. Solo."

Solo eyed the malevolent-looking yellow thing. "How does it work?"

"It broadcasts a signal on a frequency which is eventually picked up under the North Sea. In the event something should happen to me—a foolish attack on your part which would result in temporary struggle before Blightsome shot you—"

"The signal is so arranged that it is automatically relayed through the master control board of the *Moby Dick* cruising somewhere to the north of England. Thus the temporary commander aboard the sub can detonate the explosives also. By the same token, should something happen to *his* craft, and the charge fail to detonate because the sub and its relays were out of action, I have merely to set this—"

He indicated a purple button.

"—and we re-cycle for direct signal from our plane to the explosives. No middle-man, so to speak. In addition—"

A bright blue button.

"—we have controls to abort the *Moby Dick* in its entirety—blow it up. And also—"

A black one.

"—to do the same to this aircraft. A whole range of checks and balances, you might say."

Solo licked his lips, staring at the controls just a short distance away from him. He realized it was a temporary checkmate. Commander Ahab's black eyes were slitted down, all humor gone. The THRUSH chief watched him speculatively.

Ahab *wanted* him to try for the control panel. Actually expected him to do so. Ten seconds ago, Solo had planned to do exactly that. He discarded the plan.

With a swirl of curtain, the THRUSH man appeared from the galley, carrying a silver serving tray. Blightsome reached across the aisle. He dragged a low taboret over between himself and Solo. The galleyman put down the tray. Solo picked up his cup.

The surly man took the teapot and begun to pour.

As the dark, rich liquid fell in a stream into the cup, the THRUSH agent managed to spill some of it onto the back of Solo's hand. It scalded.

"Hope it's warm enough for you," the man grunted, hardly able to conceal a snicker.

Solo's skin hurt ferociously. He was having trouble holding the cup. Ahab was peering out the window at the clouds again. The cup jiggled in Solo's hand. In that split second he realized that the THRUSH galleyman's deliberate ploy of burning him gave him the perfect opening.

He swallowed once, said a mental farewell to all the thousands of pretty girls in the world he'd never gotten around to meeting or kissing, and upset the teacup straight into Blightsome's face.

"Too blasted hot—" Solo yelled like a man confused. It was an act, a cover, misdirection. He dropped the cup and grabbed for Blight-

some's gun, got it away from the startled, cursing man.

Solo used his knee to lift the taboret and tip it over with a clatter. The noise made the galleyman leap back in alarm. Commander Ahab was using both hands to shut the console cover, evidently believing Solo would go right for it.

Instead Solo jumped up, bashed the stumbling galleyman across the nose with the gun to drive him out of the way. He seized Cleo St. Cloud's wrist. "Sweetheart, it's time for you on stage again."

He thrust her forward. Squealing and clawing at him, she presented quite an obstacle to progress. But he managed to slide the cockpit door aside by reaching around her.

Inside the cockpit the pilot kept on the controls, while the co-pilot snaked a gun out of his harness. Solo shot fast. The man doubled forward, retching, a dark hole in his right cheek.

Behind him as he crowded through the cockpit door, Solo heard confused scrambling, profanity. He spun, starting to slide the cockpit door shut. He had a fragmented picture of Blightsome lurching in the aisle, face dripping scalding tea as he levelled his pistol. Solo was a fraction faster. His bullet took Blightsome in the middle and sent him rubber-legged and dying all the way back along the aisle to the plane's rear.

The slamming cockpit door muted Ahab's enraged bellows. Solo shoved past Cleo, moved to the right, out of the line of fire. To the pilot, a pasty-faced young man with fantastic eyes, he said, "Take this plane down. Land at the nearest airfield."

Carefully the pilot licked his lips. "No."

Solo had banked on this. "Take us down or I'll kill you where you sit."

"Shoot me," the pilot replied. "I refuse to obey your orders."

Distraught and sobbing, Cleo squealed again as Solo caught her wrist, dragged her forward to where the pilot could see her from the corner of his eye.

"This is Miss St. Cloud." Solo's lips were peeled back in an ungentlemanly expression. "She's Commander Ahab's little friend. Your commander grows very angry and does nasty things to people who damage his possessions."

The dart struck. The pilot's right cheek showed a muscular tic. Apparently he knew of Ahab's potential for wrath. Solo pressed on:

"Commander Ahab will do something very nasty to you, my friend, if I shoot Miss St. Cloud through the head. Which is exactly what I'm going to do unless this plane starts losing altitude."

Fear, uncertainty glittered in the pilot's eyes. Struggling, Cleo St. Cloud burst out, "It's a rotten bluff. Don't listen! An U.N.C.L.E. agent would never kill a woman—"

Wiggling his left hand around

her head and down over her mouth, Solo managed to silence her. Cleo began gnawing on his fingers with considerable savagery. Solo tried to ignore this minor distraction and concentrated on the pilot. The man's cheeks were filmed with sweat as he tried to weigh his duty to THRUSH against his personal well-being, should his decision turn out to be responsible for the girl's sudden demise.

Solo had to keep the man from thinking too much. So he shouted at him: "Start this plane down right away or she gets it! Bam, *bam!*"

That jarred the man's nerve sufficiently. He took a deep breath, grasped the control wheel more firmly, inched it forward. The nose of the sleek jet began to drop into the tattered cloud. Solo took time to gulp a deep breath of air.

It was his only respite. With a horrendous jerk, the nose of the plane came up again. The pilot goggled. He hadn't moved the controls. Then understanding dawned. He tittered.

"Over-ride controls in the rear," he said. "I forgot them. Commander Ahab is flying the plane. I can do nothing."

Desperately, Napoleon whirled around. He shoved Cleo St. Cloud out of the way, rolled back the cockpit door. A bullet chopped wood panelling out of the wall inches from his face as he dodged back. One glimpse had been enough.

The galleyman, not Ahab, was flying the plane. He was using a set of controls which were mounted to a pedestal that had apparently sprung up through the floor near the cove seat. Crouched beside him was Hadkins, the other THRUSH agent with the bowler. Hadkins' gun was trained on the cockpit. He had fired a moment ago.

The pilot yelled in terror. Solo craned around the door's edge once more, triggered a shot. Hadkins uttered a low shriek, spilled over on his side. The galleyman, alone, turned white with fright as he held onto the auxilliary control wheel mounted in the pedestal. The aircraft had levelled out but was bumping along somewhat erratically.

And where was Commander Ahab? Napoleon Solo couldn't see him anywhere in the rear compartment.

The galleyman kept one hand on the controls and reached for Hadkins' fallen gun with the other. Solo stepped through the cockpit door, wigwagged his gun muzzle.

"Both hands on the controls, please," he said.

The galleyman lifted his right hand back and fastened it on the auxilliary wheel.

Quickly Solo glided down the aisle. He stopped opposite the cove lounge seat. He kicked the top of the console with his heel. The lid snapped back. Then Solo moved to his right one pace. He jammed

the muzzle of his gun down on the bright blue button and pushed.

Somewhere on the surface of the North Sea Solo imagined a tremendous mushroom gout of water, flame, thunder and spray as the THRUSH submarine blew up. "So long, *Moby Dick*," he breathed.

"A foolish gesture," said a voice in the rear. "Don't lift the gun!"

Solo kept the muzzle down hard on the blue button. Commander Ahab had thrown back the curtain surrounding the galley where he'd been hiding. He menaced Solo with a pistol. White straps crisscrossed his chest. He wore a parachute pack over his hastily-donned overcoat. His cheeks puffed in and out with rage.

"You have cost us billions of dollars, Mr. Solo. Billions!" Spittle streaked out with the words. "But your cheap little act of bravado cost *you* a moment's advantage—and that is what will lose the game for you and win it for us."

Ahab lashed out with his right foot. His toe hit some kind of electric control plate set low in the galley's outer door. Four explosive bolts popped. The door fell off and disappeared, tumbling down the sky.

Wind howled into the cabin as Ahab screamed, "There is another detonation device somewhere in London, Mr. Solo. It's in a place you could not possibly find in the time left. But I will reach it. I must, for THRUSH, even though I will drown with the rest of them. Goodby, Solo. I won't kill you because I want you to be alive at four-thirty for the last trick. Mine—"

Ahab whirled and plunged through the door.

Solo darted around the terrified galleyman, battered by the wind pouring into the cabin. He hung precariously in the galley's open door, looking below. A white circle bloomed just above heavy clouds, sank swiftly into them. He heard a brittle laugh, whirled.

Cleo St. Cloud stood in the aisle, clutching her midsection. A random patch of gray light from one of the windows caught her gold wristwatch and made it glitter. Her makeup was smeared. Rather blearily, she laughed again.

"I haven't got a parachute, Solo," she said. "But I wouldn't be any good playing prisoner the rest of my life, anyway. We all carry these, you know." She lifted her watch hand, tapped the crystal which flew back to reveal a small empty compartment "One pill each. I just took mine."

Raging, Solo ran forward, grabbed her arm. "Where is Ahab's detonator located in London?"

Cleo St. Cloud's face was rapidly draining of color. She wasn't faking. She had taken something.

"Good luck, dear man from U.N.C.L.E. You'll never find it—"

"But you know where it is?"

"Of course I do. Of course I know where—"

She clutched her midriff, choking. She fell onto one knee, gave Solo a last, twisted smile and flopped over.

The pilot was standing up in the cockpit, peering out, bewildered. The galleyman had raised his hands in the air. Apparently he didn't mind capture. With a start Solo remembered that no one was flying the aircraft. It began a sickening nosedive just at that moment. Walking forward, he aimed his pistol at the pilot. Solo's face looked haggard, skull-like. He pointed the pistol right between the pilot's feverishly watering eyes and said:

"Land this plane. And get on the radio and call London airport. There'll be a lot of traffic on the bands if they're trying to evacuate. But you get through. When you do, I'll give you a relay frequency. We're going to contact a man named Waverly. We're going to get an emergency medical team to stand by at the airport, no matter what effort it costs."

Solo's voice was ragged, spilling out the plan even as he thought of it. "If any one of those things fail to happen because you caused trouble, you will be dead. Are you clear on all that?"

A sickening whine of jets as the plane continued its downward plunge. For one awful moment, fanaticism flared in the pilot's eyes. Then self-interest burned it out.

"Yes, sir."

He stumbled back to his seat. The plane slowly pulled out of its dive. Kneeling, Solo placed his cheek next to Cleo St. Cloud's lips.

Warmth. He felt thin warmth. He was fighting the race of poison through her bloodstream.

But he was cutting it close, very fine and close. He shuddered at the price of failure.

Stumbling up to the cockpit, he saw London boom for below as they cut through the lower layers of cloud. The radio was rattling with confused voices.

"I'm trying to get through," the pilot said. He sounded a trifle desperate.

"Give me the mike." Solo grabbed it.

Three minutes later, the tricycle landing gears of the jet bumped the London airport.

Solo scanned the area. He saw the incredible pileup of cars and pedestrians on the roads at the airport's edge. He'd relayed his message to Waverly in the war room of the British government. A first-aid team had been answering a fire call less than a mile away, and was on its way to the airport now.

The pilot brought the plane to a stop and turned off the engines. Tears of disappointment leaked down his cheeks. Through the cockpit window Solo saw a cross-marked ambulance streaking toward them.

With heavy steps he walked into the plane's rear to see whether Cleo St. Cloud were still alive.

TWO

OFF IN THE darkness of the empty hangar, a portable generator whined and hummed.

It was a nerve-wracking sound, somehow. Counterpointing it rose a frantic squawk of auto and lorry horns from beyond the concrete walls. Barely perceptible was a sustained roar which Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin knew to be the voices of Londoners fleeing in mobs along the public roadways nearby.

The pair of U.N.C.L.E. doctors had flown in moments ago in a helicopter parked on the roof of the hangar. Illya had been with them. They had joined the first-aid team in setting up an impromptu operating table made of old crates. Portable lights hooked to the generator had been hastily rigged, while two members of the first aid team pumped Cleo St. Cloud's stomach. After a swift examination, one of the U.N.C.L.E. physicians had confided to Solo and Illya that it was going to be a near thing.

A solution bottle hung upside down on a hangar stand. Through the flexible tubing attached to the bottle, near-colorless liquid dripped down into a needle taped to Cleo's left arm. Second by second the truth drug flowed into her.

Gritty-eyed and exhausted, Solo consulted his watch. Twenty-eight past three.

One of the U.N.C.L.E. doctors approached the agents.

"I think we're ready."

"Will she respond?" Illya asked. "If we make a single mistake at this point—"

The physician glowered. "Mr. Kuryakin, I can't guarantee results. That young woman was nearly dead when we started on her. Right now we stand an even chance, no better. The strain of an interrogation under drugs may be just enough to tip the scales. She could go instantly."

The two agents and the doctor started toward the circle of light. In its center, Cleo St. Cloud lay on surgical sheets hastily spread over the packing cases. Her cheeks were the color of putty. She hardly seemed to breathe. Solo knelt beside her, placed his face close to hers.

"Cleo," he said with soft intensity. "Listen, Cleo. I am a courier from THRUSH Central. I have an emergency message for Commander Ahab. I must reach him, wherever he is in London. You've got to tell me where he is so I can deliver the message."

Seconds ticked by. Cleo St. Cloud's lips trembled. She uttered a light groan.

Then her face seemed to contort, as if she were feeling great pain.

The words leaked out in a whisper:

"THRUSH Central? Message for —message for—"

Her head lolled to the side.

Solo glanced up, alarmed. One

of the doctors said, "She's fighting you. It's her training."

"Cleo?" Solo began again. "It's all right. You won't be violating any confidence. I'm working for THRUSH. You must tell me where I can find Commander Ahab."

Once more the strained, light shuddering from the girl: "No. No, mustn't. Against orders—"

Frustrated, Solo stifled a curse. One of the doctors was keeping his fingers on Cleo's pulse. He glanced at Solo apprehensively. "The strain's starting to tell."

Standing a few feet back near the periphery of the light, Illya watched Solo anxiously. Solo bent near the girl again, wiping perspiration from his nose. In Illya's right pocket a low, sustained beeping began. He pulled out the rod-shaped pocket communicator, twisted the three-part barrel to align the markings, whispered into the top end of the small rod: "Channel D is open."

Mr. Alexander Waverly's voice crackled faintly: "What progress, if any, are you making, Mr. Kuryakin?"

"This is the critical moment, sir. So far's she's refused to reveal the whereabouts of the detonator station."

"Let me know the moment you have something to report," Waverly replied. "The Prime Minister is ready to call off the entire evacuation, tidal waves or not. The city is in total chaos. Casualties are mounting too fast to be tolerated, and no one's getting out because the roadways are so clogged.

"You and Solo must locate Ahab and give me word that you have. There must be no tidal wave set off. But there must be an end to the evacuation within an hour as well, or the results will be nearly as bad as if THRUSH had accomplished its goal in the first place."

Mr. Waverly paused, lowered his voice: "I am relaying the Prime Minister's sentiments, Mr. Kuryakin. He is near the breaking point. I realize the situation facing you and Mr. Solo. You must come through. Else London is lost."

"But sir," Illya said. "If Miss St. Cloud won't give us the information—"

Waverly interrupted: "We are counting on you, Kuryakin."

With a feeling of complete dismay Illya looked again at Solo, kneeling by the jerry-rigged operating table. Cleo St. Cloud's head was moving slightly back and forth, in negation. Solo raked his fingers through his hair. Illya said: "Yes, sir. I understand. Out."

He replaced the communicator in his pocket. He walked forward into the light. Wearily Solo stood up.

"You'll have to increase the medication," Solo said to the doctors.

"Extremely risky," one of them replied. "You may lose her altogether."

"We're not getting anything now. Do it!"

Frowning, the doctor moved to the suspended bottle and unfastened a pinch clamp. The Pentothal dripped along the tube at a faster rate. Solo waited two minutes, then tried again:

"Miss St. Cloud—Cleo. Listen. THRUSH Central is going to be very angry with you. THRUSH Central—very angry." He repeated it a little more loudly. "Where is Commander Ahab? Tell me or you'll face disciplinary action. *Tell me where to find Victor Ahab.*"

Again the girl shuddered. Her lips formed a word: "Sub—" She repeated it: "Sub—"

Illya's nerves broke. "It's no good, Napoleon. Ahab isn't on the sub."

"Quiet!" Solo's face was a mask of anxiety. "She's still talking."

In the silent, sepulchral gloom of the huge hangar, Cleo St. Cloud groaned and repeated: "Sub—sub-level. Second down from the street. Parchley—" Another violent shudder shook her body. "Parchley Machining Company." Suddenly her face wrenched into lines of anguish. "Now I've—told you. Don't discipline me. *Don't hurt me—*"

Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were running for the iron stairs which led up to the door that opened onto the roof landing platform.

As they clattered up the metal risers Solo said, "We can get the coordinates of the Parchley Machining Company from Waverly."

Illya pulled the door open. They were blasted by wind from the revolving rotors of the U.N.C.L.E. 'copter standing on the concrete pad. Illya raced for the open hatch. Solo paused a moment in the doorway, looked down into the interior of the hangar.

The physicians and the unconscious Cleo resembled doll figures far below. Solo had never imagined that he'd be thanking a THRUSH agent for anything, yet he was doing it silently now.

He hoped he hadn't killed her.

Solo ran for the 'copter, jumped inside, slammed the hatch and watched the London airfield fall away beneath them.

THREE

TWELVE MINUTES later the 'copter swooped low along a grimy street in an industrial section of the city.

In the street, a mob surged along underneath them. Poor people, men, women, even children. There were a few pistols in the crowd, one rifle. It spat at them as the 'copter pilot jockeyed the craft toward the roof coping of the shabby brick building with the single word PARCHLEY painted on its exterior.

Napoleon Solo dodged back from the open hatch as another rifle bullet tore a hole in the 'copter's skin inches from his head. Curses, howls of rage rose from the mob

below. The faces turned up at them were full of hate because the 'copter represented a means of escape.

Another bullet smacked into the craft, starring the window on the pilot's side. He jerked back instinctively. The 'copter lurched. Its skids scraped the roof coping. The pilot fought for control, got the craft again. The roof was six feet below. Solo took a grip on his pistol and jumped.

Illya landed a second later, scrambled to his feet. The clouds had broken up somewhat. The air was clearing. It promised to be a sparkling late afternoon. A beautiful afternoon for millions of people to die, either under a crushing wave of water, or tearing at each other in their blind urge to escape whatever unknown fate menaced them. There was no time to think more about it.

Solo's shadow ran out ahead of him as he raced for the roof door. Without looking at his watch, he knew it was almost four. Breathing hard, he took the short flight of steps down to the top story of the building. Illya was right behind.

They ran along past large bays, where engineer's drawing boards stood unattended under weak fluorescent lights. There was an elevator at the hall's end. Solo and Illya waited for tense seconds while the cage rose from the main floor.

Solo indicated the call board above the doors. "The second sublevel is the bottom one."

"No telling whether Ahab has any helpers with him," Illya replied.

"I'm only concerned that Cleo was telling the truth."

Illya's brow hooked up. "You don't possibly suspect—"

"THRUSH has brainwashed its people with false information before."

The doors clanged open. Soon they were being carried downward. Solo let out a deep breath, leaned against the pale tan wall of the elevator.

"Whichever way it turns out, Illya, we gave them a good run for it."

"I would just as soon survive to enter next week's track meet," Illya replied.

Solo's stomach jumped a little as the cage stopped suddenly. The moment the doors opened he and Illya plunged straight ahead into a shadowy basement. Solo dodged to the left, Illya to the right, out of the bar of light spilling from the elevator. Solo crouched down behind some sort of power lathe.

Across the aisle Illya was in position behind the first of a series of bins which contained long tubes of aluminum or some other light alloy. Several hundred tubes of a standard diameter stuck up from each bin.

Cautiously Solo poked his head out from behind the lathe's legs.

Fire and smoke stitched their way thunderously from the far end of the aisle. Before jerking back

Solo had a quick glimpse of Commander Ahab, his clothing rumpled, shooting at them with a powerful snooper-scope machine rifle.

More slugs thundered, ripping up clouds of dust and stone chips from the concrete floor. In the echoing silence following the thunderous bursts, Napoleon Solo peered out again.

He no longer saw Commander Ahab down there. At the end of of the aisle, he saw only a large metal control board with dials and blinking lights. The board was mounted in a recessed section of the cinder block sub-basement wall. Ahab had been standing in front of this board shooting at them. Now he had disappeared.

Solo cleared his throat. "Commander?" he called. The syllables bounced, echoed: *Commander Commander Commander Commander—?*

At length, the booming reply, "Yes, Solo. I'm here."

"There are two of us," Illya called. "Better give up."

Floating at them, Ahab's laughter was maniacal. "Ah, gentlemen, but I am closer to the control board than you. And while it's true that you have found me, my nearness to the board dictates that I set Project Ahab in motion. A bit ahead of schedule, perhaps. But the effect will be the same.

"Come try to take me if you wish. I shall throw that large white toggle in the center of the board—I'm sure you can see it—before you reach me."

Now Solo's belly was churning. He glanced at Illya, bobbed his head toward the board at the aisle's end. Illya caught the signal. Both U.N.C.L.E. agents leaped up and started a wild headlong charge down the aisle to try and close the distance between themselves and the large white switch which loomed from the middle of the board.

Ahab's bearded face and torso popped up above the last lathe on the left. The machine-rifle cradled against his side bucked. Orange-yellow spurts of flame leaped from the muzzle. Illya cried out, spun on suddenly boneless legs, fell.

The slugs from Ahab's weapon blasted pits in the cement near Solo's feet as he shoved his friend out of the line of fire behind one of the tubing storage bins. He crouched over Illya, made a hasty examination. Illya had taken a bullet in his left rib cage, low and near the waist. He was breathing lightly.

"Where are you, my dear friends?" Commander Ahab boomed. "This is the most unseemly show of hesitation. Or have the odds been reduced? Is Mr. Kuryakin dead? Perhaps I'll wait a moment longer to throw the switch. After all, it's only a foot or so away. Perhaps I'll wait for you to try again, Mr. Solo. You are going to try, aren't you? It's your duty—"

Stung past reason by the mock-

ing voice, Napoleon Solo leaped up and charged.

He fired to cover himself as he ran. Ahab had changed positions, was now hiding behind the last of the tube storage bins on the right side of the aisle. He popped into sight, hair disarrayed, face grotesque with laughter, the machine-rifle spitting. In mid-stride Solo felt a bullet slam into his left thigh.

He stumbled, hurled himself to the right. Off balance, he let his gun slip. It skittered and slid out of reach. Trying to right himself, he reached desperately for something to hang onto. His hands caught some of the metal tubes in the nearest bin. Then his weight carried him down, pulling over the entire bin.

With a monstrous clanging, the tubes clattered over on him, six-foot lengths that smacked his head with painful force. He sprawled behind the overturned storage bin which had fallen athwart the aisle. He could no longer see anything at the aisle's end.

His leg was bloody. He was growing dizzy. He moved slightly, rolled onto his side. His movements dislodged some of the tubing, which clanked and clanged. Commander Ahab's voice boomed in the hollowness:

"Both of you out of action, eh? Splendid! I—" Ahab coughed. Shaking his head to clear it, Solo realized his adversary sounded weaker. "I fear one of your bullets made the mark, Mr. Solo. Fatal, perhaps. I—" Another wracking spasm of coughs. "I don't know. Yet I remain closer to the board than you. I think the time has come for me to—stop taking unnecessary risks. Listen carefully, Mr. Solo. You will hear a slight hum—when the toggle makes—contact. That way you will know the undersea charges—have been detonated—"

Hurting, dizzy, Solo realized he had only seconds left. From far away came the scrape and shuffle of a wounded Commander Ahab dragging his bulk toward the control board. Solo's gun was lost in the darkness. The only weapons he had were his hands. But if he leaped over the storage bin, he would never close the distance between himself and Ahab in time.

As he scrambled around to brace himself so that he could stand up, Solo's palm slid across one of the light alloy tubes.

From the aisle's end came a stifled curse. Then the sound of a heavy body falling. Ahab had taken a tumble.

Napoleon Solo calculated his last thousand-to-one-chance—and acted.

He took hold of the alloy tube and dragged himself swiftly across the aisle to the leg of the power lathe. Reaching up, he flicked the switch.

He shoved the end of the alloy tube up against the suddenly-revolving wheel nearest him. The tube whined and vibrated. Blue

sparks spat and flew. The tube's metal heated in his hands.

Solo jerked the tube back, pulled himself to his feet. He saw Commander Ahab outlined against the control board. Ahab recognized what Solo had in his hands. An expression of comprehension blended with fear on his face. He dropped his machine rifle, turned to face the board. Solo saw the blackish stain low down near the base of Ahab's spine where the bullet had caught him.

With a faltering hand Commander Ahab reached for the white switch—

With all the strength he had left, Napoleon Solo hauled back his right arm and flung the alloy tube whose end had been ripped by the lathe into a javeline-jagged point.

Ahab's fingers touched the switch. The sharpened tube drove full force into the center of his back.

Ahab shrieked. He clawed at the switch. Solo watched, horror-

NEXT MONTH'S NEW U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE THRUSH FROM THRUSH AFFAIR

Wisely, perhaps too well, had Thrush chosen its ambassador of death—a girl who spoke three tongues, knew the secrets of three espionage nets and used her blonde beauty and smile to entice the elite of world rule, to kill them with a smile. Solo and Illya too had fallen under her dominance. Who was this grim princess of death? Today, before the sun fell, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin must know, or die without a trace like the rest . . .

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

They battle under no flag, they fight in secret and die alone, the shadowy soldiers of U.N.C.L.E. In "The Man from U.N.C.L.E. Magazine" you will read superb stories of spy-adventure, written especially for your reading pleasure and patterned to the high entertainment standards which have made this magazine outstanding in the entire field of breathtaking story-telling. May we suggest that you reserve your next copy immediately?

struck. If Ahab managed to seize the vital toggle in his last death spasms—

The commander's fingers slid away, leaving the switch unthrown. He turned awkwardly, peering up the aisle toward his slayer. Then, with a last bellow of pain, he sank down like a harpooned whale.

Feebly Solo limped back to Illya, found his communicator and called Channel D.

FOUR

THE HUGE TRANS-OCEANIC jet for New York lifted from the London airfield. Napoleon Solo sat by the window, staring out.

The city was not a pleasant sight. Even forty-eight hours after the Prime Minister had called an end to the evacuation at 4:24 P.M. that fatal afternoon, fires still burned. Smoky pillars climbed into the bright afternoon sky. The streets were being patrolled by units of the British Army, plus additional NATO forces rushed in by airlift.

The casualty toll, while not nearly as high as it would have been if Project Ahab had been a success, was still unpleasant. Solo tried to shut it all out of his mind.

The only compensation in the whole affair was the recovery of Cleo St. Cloud. In return for a lightened sentence, she had offered to work for U.N.C.L.E. when she got out of the hospital. She could be valuable in training U.N.C.L.E. agents in advanced hypnotic techniques.

The jet continued its climb toward the setting sun. Solo glanced at Illya Kuryakin sitting next to him. To Solo's surprise, Illya had taken a book out of his attache case and was engrossed. He still looked pale, and heavier than usual due to the layers of bandage beneath his shirt.

"What's that you're reading?" Solo asked.

"Oh, something I picked up at a book store before we left," Illya replied. He flipped to the title page, pointed. "The Psychomilitary Uses of Medical Hypnosis. As someone once remarked, if you can't beat them, join them."

Seated across the aisle, Mr. Alexander Waverly pinched the bridge of his nose and looked unhappy.

"Put it away, Mr. Kuryakin," he said. "Put it away."

"But sir, it contains valuable information which we could profitably—"

"Not now, Mr. Kuryakin," Waverly said. "In New York, all right. But not now. Can't you occupy yourself with something that doesn't call up distressing memories?"

Suddenly Napoleon Solo grinned. The trim and most attractive stewardess was moving along the cabin aisle, speaking to various passengers.

"I can," Solo said, and rang the bell to call her.

A Matter of Patience

An unfaithful wife, he told himself, deserves a hard life . . . an even harder death.

by NORMAN DANIELS

LEO DAMION had smoked his second cigar before the couple emerged from the motel and he saw the man help the woman into the sleek, fire-engine-red sports

car which had been parked outside the cabin.

His rage was the quiet kind for the moment, but the most dangerous kind because the woman was his wife and he'd warned her before about this sort of thing.

He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd had an unhappy marriage with him. In their thirteen years together, he'd provided well. As a successful manufacturer, he'd made sufficient money to keep her in mink coat, cape and stole. Her perfumes were imported and her dresses came from only the best couturiers.

He had provided a nine room, three-and-a-half-bath ranch-suburban home which was as nice a place as the whole section boasted of. She had her own car, a by-the-day maid and a laundress. He took her to the best restaurants and night clubs. If they didn't make first night at the theatre, they were there the second.

All in all, Leo Damion thought he'd done very well for Jean and she showed her appreciation by going out with other men.

She wasn't getting away with it. The first one—Charlie Hoyt, a young lawyer who'd been struggling to find a couple of clients—she'd been out with him several times, he knew.

Leo had suffered in silence, but no man could be expected to endure that forever, so Leo had done something about it. The way things turned out, he was very proud of the way he'd handled it.

Now he looked as if he were going to be required to go through it all again. He would be careful though, just as careful as he'd been with Charlie. Getting rid of a person wasn't as difficult or dangerous as he'd believed.

It was merely a matter of patience until the right time, and then speed and strength. Leo bit the tip off a third cigar and smiled. Speed was a matter to be induced at the moment he struck; strength he already had far more than enough of.

He drove home, stopping at a bar for a couple of drinks. He made certain Jean was back before he returned. She was in the living room, already dressed in a lounging robe with her hair in curlers, and a significant lack of warmth predominated her greeting.

"Why Leo, I didn't expect you this early."

"And how did you spend the evening, my dear?"

"How do I spend all my evenings when you're not at home? Looking at television, reading—"

He loosened his tie and unlaced his right shoe because it hurt across the instep. "Of course I know you're lying," he said.

Her expression didn't change. "Have you been following me again, Leo?" she asked in a matter-of-fact voice. It was her utter lack of fear that infuriated him.

"The Brick Cellar for dinner," he related. "An unsavory, cheap place. Your new friend must be very frugal."

"Not as frugal as poor," she corrected.

"I see. Well then, there was a ride to the King's Manor Motel with a long stop on a lonely road first. Am I doing well, my dear?"

"You're accurate enough," she admitted. "What do you intend to do about it, Leo?"

He wasn't feeling the liquor he'd drunk at the bar, so he poured himself a double shot and made a short highball for Jean. She didn't touch it.

He returned to his chair and sat down slowly, regarding her with quiet contemplation.

"Of course you remember Charlie?" he asked.

"Of course."

"I killed him, you know."

For a moment he thought he was going to draw a reaction of fear because she sucked in a quick breath and was quite noisy about it. Her eyes too, went very large and looked down at her silly oversized, imitation-fur-lined slippers. He'd hoped for more than that, but he was willing to settle for what he'd gotten. The real fear would come later.

"Yes," she said, "I thought you did, Leo. Though I must say I didn't think you'd admit it."

"Im safe enough, Jean. I'm not afraid of what you might do."

She did take a drink then, and it gratified Leo very much. He waited politely until she set the glass down again.

"Killing him was very easy," he said, without bragging.

"Charlie was such a small man in comparison to you and quite without half your strength, Leo. I believe he must have been easy to kill. You strangled him, didn't you?"

"The method is known to the police as mugging."

"Yes, they said he was the victim of some cheap mugger. Leo, are you going to kill this new man also?"

"Of course I am. He's encroaching upon my property, isn't he?"

"I dislike being referred to as property, Leo."

"I beg your pardon," he said with a trace of sarcasm. "I stand corrected."

"You might be tempting fate, you know."

"I've tempted Fate in everything I've ever done. When I ran guns in the Middle East and the Orient. I tempted her when I establishd myself in a legitimate business. Both times Fate treated me very well for my risks.

"Only in you did she turn away from me. I'm older than you. I'm quite ugly, I suppose, but I am sufficiently educated and I dress well and I have a way about me that permits me to get by in the places where my money doesn't count.

Those are few and far between, but I do get by there. You, of course, are an exceedingly attractive woman. I understand why men seek you out."

"Why don't you just let me go, Leo? It would be so much easier and there'd be no risk."

"I prefer to handle this in my own way. Your Charlie—that great lover—was an attorney, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was a lawyer."

"He should have known better than to trespass, then. He died rather quickly. Would you like to hear about it, my dear?"

"I would not, but I'm quite sure I'll have to endure it, Leo."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "If you would only be as considerate and wise in your other dealings, Jean. I followed you and Charlie that night. You went to his office, long after hours and you stayed there right through the dinner hour. You and Charlie ate quite late that evening, if you remember. I waited outside."

"Oh," she asked. "Were you hungry, Leo? I hope you were."

"Yes, I was, and getting angrier by the minute. But then, you and Charlie obliged me. He drove you home and then he returned to town, put his car in the public garage where he always kept it. He worried me a bit at that moment because, instead of going directly home, he stopped at a bar. I had a drink with him. He wasn't a bad sort, if you like the quiet, withdrawn kind.

"I even paid for the drink and we discussed—what do you think? —opera. He was quite a fan, which surprised me somewhat. Well, he then obliged me by going home through the alley he invariably used. I followed him and it didn't make any difference if he saw me."

"Did you tell him you were going to murder him, Leo?" she asked. "Of course you did. It heightened the drama of the moment, didn't it? You most certainly would have told him."

He wagged his head again. "You know me so well—and so little, Jean. It's really a pity."

"I'm quite tired," she said. "I wish you'd get through the gory details which you insist I hear. Then let me go to bed."

"There isn't very much to tell. I followed him, as I told you. Halfway along the alley he heard me and he grew alarmed, I suppose. At any rate, he stopped and was going to do battle. Can you imagine a man his size going to do battle with one my size?

"But then he recognized me and he relaxed. That was when I seized him and twisted him around and curled my arm about his throat. I told him who I was as I applied the necessary pressure. It required about five minutes altogether. I robbed him because I wanted to make it look like the work of a cheap mugger and I threw his wrist-

watch into an empty van which passed me by some time later. I returned to the cafe where I'd met Charlie and I spent his money there. I bought drinks for everyone."

"He would have liked that," she said without emotion.

"Then I'm sorry I did it. When I kill your present boy friend, I shall spend his money on some selfish thing."

"You intend to keep this up? Kill all the men I meet, Leo?"

"No," Leo said. "He will be the last."

She seemed surprised. "You believe I'll be sufficiently cured by then?"

"I doubt you ever will be, Jean. A girl as beautiful as you will be a natural target for charming men and you are easily charmed. So it would happen again and again. But I won't let it."

"I don't understand how you will stop something you admit is inevitable, Leo. Eventually you're bound to make a slip and be caught."

"I came to that conclusion myself when you took this new man into your life. I intend to kill him, but there will be no others because I intend to kill you too."

The ice in the glass she held clinked as her hand shook in one tremor of fear. He didn't miss it and he loved it. Under that chilly exterior she was scared to death.

"You'll find it difficult," she

promised him. "Together we'd make a formidable defense against you."

"Oh, but it won't be together. I wish I could arrange that, but I'm not a fool, Jean. I'm also a man who doesn't care to overexert myself in a matter which doesn't require it. A simple little matter of murder. And then it will be your turn. You may retire now. Sleep well, my darling."

She walked calmly across the spacious room and he watched her, liking the swing to her gait, reluctantly admitting to himself that he wasn't man enough to hold a girl like this. She climbed the staircase to the second floor, not hurrying, being as graceful about it as a cat. He thought it was all a great pity and he had another drink before going to bed. He rested very well.

Jean did not. She locked the door of her room and sat down on the bed for a moment before she threw herself across the satin spread and wept. She did it quietly, because he'd have derived so much satisfaction from hearing her. It was no easy thing to hold back, to let him know how much she had liked Charlie Hoyt, to betray her anger and terror over his murder and the callous way Leo described it.

Right from the first, she'd known Leo had killed him. Charlie hadn't been so stupid that he didn't know that Leo was following them, but he didn't know Leo personally, had never even seen him at close range, so it was very likely that Leo had bought him a drink in macabre delight just before he murdered him.

Now Leo was going to kill Ted, then murder her. He was so sure of himself, of his competence as a killer. The sad part of it was the fact that he had gotten away with killing Charlie and his confidence made him dangerous.

The police would never believe her story if she went to them. Leo was too well known as a kind and honorable man. Also, in making such a charge she'd leave herself open to censure.

Leo would probably once again resort to the use of his enormous strength and size to kill Ted. It had worked so well with Charlie that he was bound to adopt the same safe, proven method. Besides, there'd been a series of muggings over the past two years and Leo was taking advantage of a situation, which was just like him.

She had no doubt but that he would then kill her. Not before Ted was dead, however. He'd want to boast about that and watch her go to pieces as she knew the same thing was about to happen to her.

There was much physical strength about Leo, but there were certain weaknesses in his character makeup. She would have to take advantage of these if she wanted to live—and she did. She feared death. Leo literally terrorized her.

She hadn't slept well in weeks, ever since she realized Leo had been following her and Charlie. This couldn't continue much longer or she'd give herself away, or make an idiot of herself by going to the police.

She slept badly again that night, but in the morning she pretended to be fast asleep and breathed heavily when she heard Leo's footsteps pause outside her door.

A lock wouldn't stop him if he wanted to come in, but Leo had his office to maintain and he insisted upon keeping up a reputation for reliability. It set a fine example for his employees. Besides, he would prefer to torture her with his threats in the evening, when he had more time and was more relaxed.

When she heard the rear door close and the whir of his car starter, she felt an easing of tension and she did go to sleep.

It was afternoon when she awakened. She showered, dressed and then went downstairs. It was the maid's day off, so she made her own combination breakfast and lunch. After she did the dishes, she telephoned Ted and made a date to meet him on the corner of East and Hanover Streets at nine-thirty.

For the sake of formality, Leo telephoned her at five and said he would be very late getting home because of a pressure of business. Sometimes he told the truth about that, and she had no way of knowing if he was lying tonight.

Leo was lying. He worked later than usual, that was true, but only to kill time. He had two sandwiches and a quart of coffee sent in. By seven-thirty he was ready to leave. He removed all personal possessions from his pockets. Too often some object was left at the scene of a murder through sheer carelessness. He slipped into his dark gray topcoat, adjusted his hat to a rakish angle which gave him a less pugnacious look.

He drove toward his home, parked down a dark lane just off the road and waited. When Jean drove by in the red sports car, Leo followed at a considerable distance. She turned down Hanover, finally. It was a quiet side street and he strongly suspected she would pick up Ted along here.

As Jean's brake lights suddenly flashed and she pulled in toward the curb, Leo made a casual turn off the avenue three blocks behind her and parked until she returned, this time with a man beside her.

Unfortunately, Leo knew very little about Ted. He didn't know his name and had no idea where he lived or what his occupation might be. He did know that he could very easily overpower him at any time he chose. It might be tonight, if conditions warranted it, or next time they met.

He stayed well behind as Jean crossed town again and headed toward a highway. He chuckled when they stopped at a drive-in. Ted obviously wasn't any more affluent or generous than good old Charlie had been.

Leo remained parked alongside the highway and close enough so that he could smell the tantalizing aroma of the hot dogs and hamburgers dispensed in great quantities by the place. He was glad they'd selected a drive-in that busy, it was easier for him to keep them under constant observation without being seen himself.

After half an hour they drove off. This time, under the lights of the drive-in, Leo had a fairly good look at the man with her. He wasn't as young as Charlie had been, but physically about the same size. He'd offer no appreciable resistance. Leo felt quite content with things in general.

Killing Jean would be something else. He had no idea how he'd accomplish that. She was close to him

and he'd automatically be involved, so he'd have to be most careful.

There was no great hurry anyway. Jean knew the futility of going to the police. He was too well known, too respected; they'd believe whatever story he countered hers with.

The red car was slowing up and suddenly it turned off into one of those small, unappealing motel courts. He hated her very much at that moment because she made the thing so cheap and tawdry.

There was really no point to waiting here. They might be hours, although he suspected she'd try to return home before he got there. However, she'd drop the man off at the same spot where she'd met him. She usually made a point of this and there was no reason to believe she'd do it any differently tonight.

He drove back to Third and Hanover, found a likely spot to park and settled down to wait. He was well supplied with his usual light-colored cigars. He smoked quietly and once he extended his arm to see if he was afflicted with any sign of tremors. His fingertips were steady as those of a statue. He felt quite proud of himself; he rather hoped Jean's new man-in-her-life would present Leo with a favorable chance of killing him tonight.

Leo had no fear of consequences. It was all so simple when an intelligent man used his head. Of course if Jean hadn't been quite so stupid and frightened, he might have run into trouble, but she worried him none at all. The best she could do was make accusations he would sadly refute, and she'd have absolutely no evidence to back up her fantasy.

They were later than usual tonight. He was fretting by eleven-thirty, and growing angry, which was a sensation he didn't enjoy. It might make him too eager, too willing to risk chances in order to kill the man while he felt this way. He tried to regain his former calmness, but it was difficult to do and then he knew why his anger was so possessive.

Jean wasn't trying to deceive him any longer. If she returned home after he did, she obviously didn't care if he knew it.

His anger increased as he thought about this new factor, and when her car finally passed the spot where he was hidden and swung to the curb at the corner, Leo was in a state of high rage.

He heard her laugh. It seemed merry and bright and the man said something to her that made her laugh again. Leo crouched down and waited until she made the turn at the corner and headed back to pass his hiding place once more.

He left the lights off, waited until she was gone a few moments and then pulled out into the street and looked for the man. He spotted him walking slowly down Third

Street, which was one of those streets which are paved, have sidewalks, but few houses and many vacant lots. The spot was absolutely ideal and the time was most favorable.

He drove on by the man who didn't seem worried or in a hurry. Leo stopped two blocks away, turned the corner, parked, waited and brooded and grew angrier and angrier.

The man was approaching and he was whistling softly as if he didn't have a care in the world. Suddenly Leo stepped out to confront him and, as he did so, his rage grew overpowering. He would tantalize the man, he'd tell him why he was doing this, but not until he had him firmly held and the man was slowly dying.

The man came to an abrupt stop as Leo charged toward him. But then he did a strange thing. He seemed to brace himself and suddenly he reached under his coat. Leo was moving too fast to stop, to even think.

It suddenly flashed across his mind that the man had drawn a gun. A gun! What business did a man like him have in carrying a weapon?

Leo kept on going. The gun levelled.

Leo screamed his rage. He saw the gun flash, he felt the shock of the bullet as it hit, but the pain was almost non-existent because he died practically on the instant as the heavy slug ripped through his chest and then his heart.

To an excited and somewhat frightened householder who dared to approach the scene, the man with the gun still in his hand, also produced a gold badge.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Ted Barnes," he said. "I live a block away. Call police headquarters and tell them I was just compelled to shoot a man. I'll wait here."

"Is he—in need of an ambulance, Sergeant?"

"Not this one," Sergeant Barnes said. "He must have been crazy, coming at me that way."

Sergeant Barnes told the simple story to his captain a little while later.

"I'd been working on that Jean Damion blackmail thing. Mrs. Damion and I went out again on word she got from the blackmailer, but just like the other times, he didn't show."

The captain looked down at the dead man, now decently covered with a blanket. "Maybe this is the blackmailer. Somehow, he found out you were a cop—"

"Could be. Nothing on him in the way of identification and, believe me, Captain, there was murder in his eyes."

"Well, we'll have an explanation as soon as we find out who he is. No progress at all with the Damion blackmailer?"

"None. I'm beginning to think it's all a hoax. Not by Mrs. Dam-

ion. She's just about one of the finest women I've ever met."

"Beautiful too," the Captain said. "Some of the other boys in the office think you're mighty lucky."

Sergeant Barnes walked toward the police car.

"I'll stop at my home and tell my wife everything's okay," he said. "Then I'll go down and make a report. I wish I could put into it the reason why this confounded idiot attacked me."

"It all washes out eventually," the captain said. "You run along. Oh yes, you might phone Mrs. Damion and tell her we're going to put a new man on her case. You'll be too busy working up this one, I'm afraid."

"I'd appreciate the change, Captain. Sitting around cheap motels and drive-ins gets monotonous after awhile. Even with a beautiful and interesting woman."

"I hope Mrs. Damion won't be disappointed at the news." The captain kidded him a bit.

Mrs. Damion wasn't disappointed. There might be some questions later on when they found out it was her husband Ted had killed, but she was sure she could cope with any investigation. For tonight, she was content.

She went to bed and slept very well indeed.

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NONE for the LITTLE BOY

by ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

Somewhere out there in the wasteland a man was on his way to a fortune. But first he had a date with death!

THE TWO OUTBACK men had been digging test holes up a dry Paleozoic stream bed for well over a fortnight, following a dipping gold-trace.

Now Wally Cord was in a five-foot hole which he figured must be the fountainhead of the old deposit, and Bill Huffer had returned to camp to refill the canteen. It was high time.

The Great Sandy Desert sprawled around the little scrub hills like a white and brown circle. Rains were weeks late in the back country of the Australian continent —only the rabbits and kangaroos could survive in that drouth-bitten world.

Cord's pick grated on broken rock and he paused to examine the find. Broken quartz, he thought, and went at it with the pick again. Then he thrust his shovel into the loose mass. His eye caught a gleam of yellow and he dropped the shovel and hunkered down to rub the dirt from a piece of rotten quartz.

It was only half rock he held in his hand; the other half was virgin gold. Big chunk, too. And there were more and more of them. It was a rich pocket—a glory hole.

Then Bill Huffer's shadow fell over the pit.

"So we've struck it, eh?" Huffer's voice was casual, mild, just as if they both hadn't been ready to chuck it as a bad job.

It was one of the things about Huffer that rubbed Cord's cross-grained: that smug, smiling complacency. And he was so damn fastidious, always trying to play the gentleman in his parlor. A hell of a man for a rough outback swaggy to tie up with!

Cord turned and looked up into Huffer's calm, smiling, sunburned face, and he said, "That's right, mate. We're rich." And it was right then the idea came into being.

You're a dead man, mate, he thought.

The sun was smoldering over the red clay hills and murky haze of scrubby trees when the partners strolled down the trail to their camp in the runty eucalyptus. A ruddy wash spread out over the western sky and dust floated in the hot air like ashes.

"I knew it had to be there," Huffer said nonchalantly.

Yes you did, you s.o.b. Cord thought. "That's right," he said aloud. "Something had to be up there with all the color we found down in the dry wash." But his mind was on other things. . . .

There were two ways of doing it. One, he emptied the Lister bag —their only source of water—and took off in the truck, leaving Huffer out there to die of thirst. Two, he emptied the spare gas cans in the truck and let Huffer run out of gas a couple hundred miles out in the desert. Either way you looked at it, nobody could say he had laid a hand on Huffer. Not technically.

Huffer's pockets were blistered with nuggets and he had trouble fishing out a coin.

"Toss you to see who goes to file the claim," he said.

"Righto," Cord said. "Heads."

The coin spun and Huffer caught it and slapped it on his wrist.

"Tails." He smiled about it. "Looks like I get the beer."

"You've got all the luck, mate," Cord said. He smiled too.

So he would have to arrange to empty the spare gas cans . . .

Cord walked off into the scrub and returned a few minutes later with an armload of sandalwood sticks with which he built a fire to boil a billy can of water for tea while Huffer mixed a mess of damper dough from flour and water.

"Water's getting fairly low in the Lister bag," Huffer said.

"Don't worry about it," Cord said. "I'll have enough to get by. You'll be back within three days."

That was the one chancy part about staying behind—the water. The Lister supply *was* low, and he was going to have to make it stretch for . . . *Let's see,* he thought. *Today is the first, and those two rabbiters who are trapping up north*

said they'd look in on us on their way back on the tenth. Ten long days then.

It was going to be a tight dry squeeze, but he could do it if he had to. He would stay relatively immobile in the shade and would ration his water as if each drop were a golden nugget.

Pungent blue smoke of the sandalwool rose in the air like incense and Cord pulled back from it. He stood up and scanned the landscape, his eyes moving along the path that led down to the truck parked in the she-oaks, then along the bush track that wandered on into the scrub and burning sand. It was going to be a cruel swollen-tongue death way out there.

Huffer dropped a portion of tea into the billy can as he removed it from the fire. He glanced up at his partner.

"No sign of rain," he said.

"Nope," Cord agreed. He hunkered down and looked at Huffer, hating him. Huffer came from a good family, once; never let you forget it either. He wasn't like the other outback swaggies. He was always as neat as a pin, no matter how grubby the job; never lost his temper, never swore like a cobber, and Bill Huffer was always smiling that damn self-satisfied, complacent smile.

The desert will wipe it off your dial, mate, Cord thought. He almost laughed aloud at his sudden sense of secret power. Huffer's death was going to make Cord one of the richest men in Australia.

Darkness settled over them as they completed their scant meal. The needle leafed she-oaks stood grim and ghastly with their barren broken branches. Strange shadows began darting to and fro, and squeals and squeaks sounded around the two men. Frantic rabbits were out there in the baked dark looking for water.

A kangaroo poked its head into the skyline to watch furtively, and a pair of emus came up like stalking brown ghosts and vanished. Foxes herded among the rabbits with tails in the dust, and the fluting whistle of a boobook owl came from the scrub.

They got their lantern going, emptied the nuggets from their pockets and started rubbing the dirt away from fragment after fragment, tossing them into their gold-pan. Smiling, Bill Huffer paraphrased one of Mother Goose's nursery jingles:

"One for the master, one for the dame, and one for the little boy who'll file the claim."

Cord watched him, his eyes iridescent in the lantern light.

"You'll set yourself up fancy now, eh mate?" he said. "You'll likely go to England and play the swell."

"Not a bit of it," Huffer said. "I mean to stay here and buy a sheep station. I like it out here."

Do you? Cord thought, and

again he had to snap back his laughter. *Well, I'll see that you get all of it you like.*

They rolled into their blankets and said good night and Huffer composed himself for sleep. Cord pretended sleep. The moon rose, a brimming red mask of a face peering over the horizon, and now and then a few dingoes yelped their wild dog cry in the distance.

Then it was midnight and Huffer was breathing soft fluttery sounds through his half-parted lips, and Cord rolled quietly from his blanket.

He slipped down the path to the she-oak stand and climbed into the back of the old truck that had been long ago retired from the army. They kept three five-gallon gas cans in a rack in there and Cord removed them one by one and hauled them out in the scrub and emptied them into the parched sand. No trace was left except a lingering pungent odor of gasoline.

He returned the empties to the rack in the truckbed and then paused to think of what else. The radiator. A man could live off the rusty water in a radiator if he had to. He went around to the front of the truck and eased up the hood, drew a penknife from his pocket and punched a slit in one of the water hoses. Should do it nicely.

Cord went back to camp and slid under his blanket. He smiled a complacent smile.

They woke with the first gleam of the never-never dawn. In a few minutes they had a fire licking around the billy can, and the sun was bristling over a ridge of red rocks in a china blue sky by the time they were done with breakfast.

"I might as well get an early start," Huffer said. "It's going to be another scorcher."

"Best thing," Cord agreed.

Huffer stood up to say, "Well, I'll just take a minute to run the razor over my face. A rich man such as myself must make a good impression on the townies." He smiled.

Wasn't that just like him, Cord thought with disgust. Any other bush cobber would return to civilization looking like a regular dirt-grained swaggy, and worry about a tidy appearance after he got there. But not little Beau Geste. He had to go in with a fresh dial. But what the hell; it was a nice way to die—clean-shaven. Cord had to turn away to keep from laughing.

"I'll fill the water bag and put it in the truck for you," he said.

"Thanks, Wally."

The poor sap actually thanked him!

Cord took the canvas waterbag over to the round-bottomed Lister bag which hung suspended from a needlewood tripod, and half filled it. He begrudged wasting even that much water. Couldn't be helped though. Huffer might be watching

from the tent. He went down the path to the truck and climbed up in back to suspend the waterbag to the gas-can rack. Then he punched a slit in the bottom seam.

Nobody—if there ever should be an investigation—would notice that any more than they would notice the slit in the water hose. The only possible question would concern the empty gas cans. But Cord could always claim he knew nothing about them. Maybe the truck had a gas leak.

Anything could happen to a man alone on a desert. Everyone knew that.

Huffer, his face as bright and clean as baby skin, met him on the path and put out his hand. "No more damper dough and tea for us, partner," he said, smiling. "Caviar and champagne only."

"That's right, mate," Cord said and he shook hands.

They parted and Cord went on up to camp. He had banged up and down the Back o' Beyond for many years and had seen the remains of men who had died of thirst out there. It had never been pretty. Just thinking of what was shortly going to happen to Huffer gave him a need for a drink, and he went for the canteen.

It was empty. He knew it the moment he picked it up. He dropped the canteen and ran around to the back of the tent to the Lister bag. The last trickle of water was piddling into the thirsty sand.

That's why he wanted to shave, Cord thought. Then he spun on the spot and started running back down the path, yelling.

"Bill! Bill, wait! You're going to kill us both!"

But even as he screamed and ran he knew he was way too late. He could hear the choggity old motor of the truck carrying the complacently smiling Bill Huffer off into the salt bush stubs, as the burning morning sun settled into its fiery red sweep toward the west.

SHELL SCOTT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Forty million—count 'em—wild-eyed readers are proud to be numbered among those who have bought books and magazines featuring the incomparable Shell Scott, the private eye with the slow drawl, the fast draw and that certain way with the ladies, good, bad—but never indifferent. Every issue of "Shell Scott Mystery Magazine" features a lead novel headlining Shell Scott. Reserve your copy now—and see what you've been missing all these years in crime-reading thrills!

DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES

A previously published story is not necessarily a permanently preserved story, available to everyone. Too often, in fact, it is just the opposite. So transitory is magazine publication alone—usually thirty days on sale—that far too many outstanding tales are overlooked and forgotten before they have their deserved chance to become famous. For many years this very real loss of talent and deserved fame has troubled us, so much that we have decided to do something about it. And this magazine, "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," because of its very freshness and unconventional approach, would seem to be the perfect medium in which to do it. From time to time, therefore, in this magazine, you will see the Department of Lost Stories. *When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whoever its author, has been revered and remembered as too good to be forgotten. "The Perfect Host" is one of these. You'll remember it!*

THE EDITORS

I

As Told By

RONNIE DANIELS

I WAS FOURTEEN then. I was sitting in the car waiting for Dad to come out of the hospital. Dad was in there seeing Mother. It was the day after Dad told me I had a little sister.

It was July, warm, and I suppose about four in the afternoon. It was almost time for Dad to come out. I half opened the car door and looked for him.

Someone called, "Mister! Mister!"

There was a red squirrel arcing across the thick green lawn, and a man with balloons far down the block. I looked at them. Nobody would call me Mister. Nobody ever had, yet. I was too young.

"Mister!"

It was a woman's voice, but

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by

THEODORE STURGEON

Whenever "off-trail" fiction is discussed, wherever it is evaluated, Theodore Sturgeon's name will be among the foremost. Master of the urbanely macabre, deft delver into the unknown, Mr. Sturgeon has always been rated one of the greats of science fiction-fantasy writers. Author of more than twenty novels, including "More Than Human" best-of-the year award winner, Mr. Sturgeon is currently writing television plays in Hollywood, as well as being book reviewer for the "National Review." Possibly not since H. G. Wells has a writer been as successful in portraying "The World of Tomorrow Today." He has few peers in his field, no betters. It is a rare privilege to reproduce here one of his incomparable tales.

---

rough; rough and nasty. It was strong, and horrible for the pleading in it. No strong thing should beg. The sun was warm and the red of the brick buildings was warm, too. The squirrel was not afraid.

The grass was as green and smooth as a jellybean.

Mother was all right, Dad said, and Dad felt fine. We would go to the movies, Dad and I, close together with a closeness that never happened when things were regular, meals at home, Mother up making breakfast every morning, and all that. This week it would be raids on the ice box and staying up late sometimes, because Dad forgot about bed-time and anyway wanted to talk.

"Mister!"

Her voice was like a dirty mark on a new collar. I looked up.

She was hanging out of a window on the second floor of a near ell of the hospital. Her hair was dank and stringy, her eyes had mud in them, and her teeth were beautiful.

She was naked, at least to the waist. She was saying "Mister!" and she was saying it to me.

I was afraid, then. I got in the car and slammed the door.

"Mister! Mister! Mister!"

They were syllables that meant nothing. A "mis," a "ter"—sounds

that rasped across the very wound they opened. I put my hands over my ears, but by then the sounds were inside my head, and my hands just seemed to keep them there. I think I sobbed. I jumped out of the car and screamed, "What? What?"

"I got to get out of here," she moaned.

I thought, why tell me? I thought, what can I do? I had heard of crazy people, but I had never seen one. Grown-up people were sensible, mostly. It was only kids who did crazy things, without caring how much sense they made. I was only fourteen.

"Mister," she said. "Go to—to. . . . Let me think, now. . . . Where I live. Where I live."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In Homeland," she said.

She sank down with her forehead on the sill, slowly, as if some big slow weight were on her shoulderblades. I could see only the top of her head, the two dank feathers of her hair, and the point of an elbow. Homeland was a new residential suburb.

"Where in Homeland?" It seemed to be important. To me, I mean, as much as to her.

"Twenty," she mumbled. "I have to remember it . . ." and her voice trailed off. Suddenly she stood bolt upright, looking back into the room as if something had happened there. Then she leaned far out.

"Twenty sixty-five," she snarled. "You hear? Twenty sixty-five. That's the one."

"Ron! Ronnie!"

It was Dad, coming down the path, looking at me, looking at the woman.

"That's the one," said the woman again.

There was a flurry of white behind her. She put one foot on the sill and sprang out at me. I closed my eyes. I heard her hit the pavement.

When I opened my eyes they were still looking up at the window. There was a starched white nurse up there with her fingers in her mouth, all of them, and eyes as round and blank as a trout's. I looked down.

I felt Dad's hand on my upper arm. "Ronnie!"

I looked down. There was blood, just a little, on the cuff of my trousers. There was nothing else.

"Dad. . . ."

Dad looked all around, on the ground.

He looked up at the window and at the nurse. The nurse looked at Dad and at me, and then put her hands on the sill and leaned out and looked all around on the ground. I could see, in the sunlight, where her fingers were wet from being in her mouth.

Dad looked at me and again at the nurse, and I heard him draw a deep quivering breath as if he'd forgotten to breathe for a while and had only just realized it. The nurse

straightened up, put her hands over her eyes and twisted back into the room.

Dad and I looked at each other. He said, "Ronnie—what was—what . . ." and then licked his lips.

I was not as tall as my father, though he was not a tall man. He had thin, fine obedient hair, straight and starting high. He had blue eyes and a big nose and his mouth was quiet. He was broad and gentle and close to the ground, close to the earth.

I said, "How's Mother?"

Dad gestured at the ground where something should be, and looked at me. Then he said, "We'd better go, Ron."

I got into the car. He walked around it and got in and started it, and then sat holding the wheel, looking back at where we had been standing. There was still nothing there. The red squirrel, with one cheek puffed out, came bounding and freezing across the path.

I asked again how Mother was.

"She's fine. Just fine. Be out soon. And the baby. Just fine." He looked back carefully for traffic, shifted and let in the clutch. "Good as new," he said.

I looked back again. The squirrel hopped and arched and stopped, sitting on something. It sat on something so that it was perhaps ten inches off the ground, but the thing it sat on couldn't be seen. The squirrel put up its paws and popped a chestnut into them from its cheek, and put its tail along its back with the big tip curled over like a fern frond, and began to nibble. Then I couldn't see any more.

After a time Dad said, "What happened there just as I came up?"

I said, "What happened? Nothing. There was a squirrel."

"I mean, uh, up at the window."

"Oh, I saw a nurse up there."

"Yes, the nurse." He thought for a minute. "Anything else?"

"No. What are you going to call the baby?"

He looked at me strangely. I had to ask him again about the baby's name.

"I don't know yet," he said distantly. "Any ideas?"

"No, Dad."

We rode along for quite a while without saying anything. A little frown came and went between Dad's eyes, the way it did when he was figuring something out, whether it was a definition at charades, or an income tax report, or a problem of my school algebra.

"Dad. You know Homeland pretty well, don't you?"

"I should. Our outfit agented most of those sites. Why?"

"Is there a Homeland Street, or a Homeland Avenue out there?"

"Not a one. The north and south ones are streets, and are named after trees. The east and west ones are avenues, and are named after flowers. All alphabetical. Why?

"I just wondered. Is there a number as high as twenty sixty-five?"

"Not yet, though I hope there will be some day . . . unless it's a telephone number. Why, Ron? Where did you get that number?"

"I dunno. Just thought of it. Just wondered. Where are we going to eat?"

We went to the Bluebird.

I Suppose I knew then what had gotten into me when the woman jumped; but I didn't think of it, any more than a redhead goes around thinking to himself "I have red hair" or a taxi-driver says to himself "I drive a cab."

I knew, that's all. I just knew. I knew the *purpose,* too, but didn't think of it, any more than a man thinks and thinks of the place where he works, when he's on his way to work in the morning.

II

As Told By

BENTON DANIELS

RONNIE'S not an unusual boy. Oh, maybe a little quieter than most, but it takes all kinds. He's good in school, but not brilliant; averages in the low eighties, good in music and English and history, weak in math, worse in science than he could be if he cared a little bit more about it.

That day when we left the hospital grounds, though, there was something unusual going on. Yes, sir. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, and I must say I still can't.

Sometimes I think it's Ronnie, and sometimes I think it was something temporarily wrong with me. I'm trying to get it all straight in my mind, right from the start.

I had just seen Clee and the baby. Clee looked a little tired, but her color was wonderful. The baby looked like a baby—that is, like a little pink old man, but I told Clee she was beautiful and takes after her mother, which she will be and do, of course, when she gets some meat on her bones.

I came along the side path from the main entrance, toward where the car was parked. Ronnie was waiting for me there. I saw him as I turned toward the road, just by the north building.

Ronnie was standing by the car, with one foot on the running board, and he seemed to be talking with somebody in the second-floor window. I called out to him, but he didn't hear. Or he paid no attention. I looked up, and saw someone in the window. It was a woman, with a crazy face. I remember an impression of very regular, white teeth, and scraggly hair. I don't think she had any clothes on.

I was shocked, and then I was very angry. I thought, here's some poor sick person gone out of her mind, and she'll maybe mark Ronnie for life, standing up there like that and maybe saying all sorts of things.

I ran to the boy, and just as I reached him, the woman jumped. I think someone came into the room behind her.

Now, look. I distinctly heard that woman's body hit. It was a terrible sound. And I remember feeling a wave of nausea just then, but for some reason I was sure then, and I'm sure now, that it had nothing to do with the thing I saw. That kind of shock-nausea only hits a person after the shock, not before or during. I don't even know why I think of this at all. It's just something I feel sure about, that's all.

I heard her body hit. I don't know whether I followed her body down with my eyes or not. There wasn't much time for that; she didn't fall more than twenty-five, maybe twenty-eight feet.

I heard the noise, and when I looked down—*there wasn't anything there!*

I don't know what I thought then. I don't know if a man does actually *think* at a time like that. I know I looked all around, looking for a hole in the ground or maybe a sheet of camouflage or something which might be covering the body. It was too hard to accept that disappearance. They say that a dog doesn't bother with his reflection in a mirror because he can't smell it, and he believes his nose rather than his eyes. Humans aren't like that, I guess. When your brain tells you one thing and your eyes another, you just don't know what to believe.

I looked back up at the window, perhaps thinking I'd been mistaken, that the woman would still be up there.

She was gone, all right. There was a nurse up there instead, looking down, terrified.

I returned to Ronnie and started to ask him what had happened. I stopped when I saw his face. It wasn't shocked, or surprised, or anything. Just relaxed. He asked me how his mother was.

I said she was fine. I looked at his face and marveled that it showed nothing of this horrible thing that had happened. It wasn't blank, mind you. It was just as if nothing had occurred at all, or as if the thing had been wiped clean out of his memory.

I thought at the moment that that was a blessing, and, with one more glance at the window—the nurse had gone—I went to the car and got in. Ronnie sat next to me. I started the car, then looked back at the path. There was nothing there.

I suppose the reaction hit me then—that, or the thought that I had had a hallucination. If I had, I was naturally worried. If I had not, what had happened to Ronnie?

I drove off, finally. Ronnie made some casual small talk; I questioned him about the thing, carefully, but he seemed honestly to

know nothing about it. I decided to let well enough alone, at least for the time being. . . .

We had a quick dinner at the Bluebird, and then went home. I suppose I was poor company for the boy, because I kept finding myself mulling over the thing. We went to the Criterion, and I don't believe I heard or saw a bit of it. Then we picked up an evening paper and went home. He went to bed while I sat up with the headlines.

I found it down at the bottom of the third page. This is the item:

WOMAN DIES IN HOSPITAL LEAP

Mrs. Helmuth Stoye, of Homeland, was found yesterday afternoon under her window at Memorial Hospital, Carstairs. Dr. R. B. Knapp, head physician at the hospital, made a statement to the press in which he absolved the hospital and staff from any charges of negligence. A nurse, whose name is withheld, had just entered Mrs. Stoye's room when the woman leaped to her death.

"There was no way to stop her," said Dr. Knapp. "It happened too fast."

Dr. Knapp said that Mrs. Stoye had shown no signs of depression or suicidal intent on admission to the hospital four days ago. Her specific illness was not divulged.

Mrs. Stoye, the former Grace Korshak of Ferntree, is survived by her husband, a well-known printer here.

I went straight to the telephone and dialed the hospital. I heard the ringing signal once, twice, and then, before the hospital could answer, I hung up again. What could I ask them, or tell them? "I saw Mrs. Stoye jump." They'd be interested in that, all right. Then what? "She disappeared when she hit the ground." I can imagine what they'd say to that. "But my son saw it too!" And the questions from hospital officals, a psychiatrist or two. . . . . Ronnie being questioned, after he had mercifully forgotten about the whole thing . . . no. No; better let well enough alone.

The newspaper said Mrs. Stoye was found under her window. Whoever found her must have been able to see her.

I wonder what the nurse saw?

I went into the kitchen and heated some coffee, poured it, sweetened it, stirred it, and then left it untasted on the table while I put on my hat and got my car keys.

I had to see that nurse. First I tore out the newspaper article—I didn't want Ronnie ever to see it.

III

As Told By

LUCILLE HOLDER

I HAVE seen a lot of ugly things as a trainee and as a nurse, but

they don't bother me very much. It isn't that the familiarity hardens one; it is rather that one learns the knack of channeling one's emotions around the ugly thing.

When I was a child in England I learned how to use this knack. I lived in Coventry, and though Herr Hitler's treatment of the city seems to have faded from the news and from fiction, the story is still vividly written on the memories of us who were there, and is read and reread more often than we care to say.

You can't know what this means until you know the grim happiness that the chap you've dug out of the ruins is a dead 'un, for the ones who still live horrify you so.

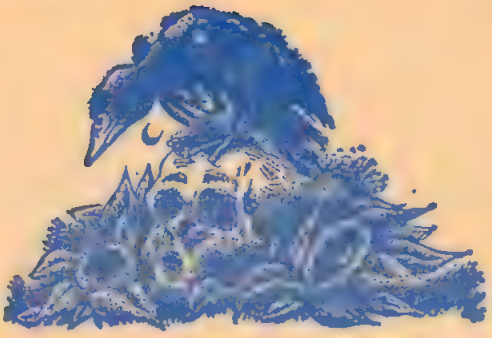
So—one gets accustomed to the worst. Further, one is prepared when a worse "worst" presents itself.

And I suppose that it was this very preparation which found me jolly well unprepared for what happened when Mrs. Stoye jumped out of her window.

There were two things happening from the instant I opened her door. One thing was what I did, and the other thing is what I felt.

These are the things I did:

I stepped into the room, carrying a washing tray on my arm. Everything seemed in order, except, of course, that Mrs. Stoye was out of bed. That didn't surprise me; she was ambulant. She was over by



the window; I suppose I glanced around the room before I looked directly at her.

When I saw her pajama-top lying on the bed-clothes I looked at her, though.

She straightened up suddenly as she heard me, barked something about "That's the one!" and jumped—dived, rather—right out. It wasn't too much of a drop, really—less than thirty feet, I'd say, but she went down head first, and I knew instantly that she hadn't a chance.

I can't remember setting down the washing tray; I saw it later on the bed. I must have spun around and set it there and rushed to the window.

I looked down, quite prepared for the worst, as I've said.

But what I saw was so terribly much worse than it should have been. I mean, an ill person is a bad thing to see, and an accident case can be worse, and burn cases, I think, are worst of all. The thing is, these all get worse in one direction. One simply cannot be prepared for something which is bad in

a totally unexpected, impossible way.

There was nothing down there at all. Nothing. I saw Mrs. Stoye jump out, ran to the window, it couldn't have been more than three seconds later; and there was nothing there.

But I'm saying now how I felt. I mean to say first what I did, because the two are so different, from this point on.

I looked down; there was no underbrush, no flowerbed, nothing which could have concealed her had she rolled. There were some people—a stocky man and a young boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen—standing nearby. The man seemed to be searching the ground as I was; I don't remember what the boy was doing. Just standing there. The man looked up at me; he looked badly frightened. He spoke to the boy, who answered quietly, and then they moved off together to the road.

I looked down once more, still could not see Mrs. Stoye, and turned and ran to the signal-button.

I rang it and then rushed out into the hall. I must have looked very distraught.

I ran right into Dr. Knapp, all but knocking him over, and gasped out that Mrs. Stoye had jumped.

Dr. Knapp was terribly decent. He led me back into the room and told me to sit down. Then he went to the window, looked down and grunted. Miss Flaggon came in just then. I was crying.

Dr. Knapp told her to get a stretcher and a couple of orderlies and take them outside, under this window. She asked no questions, but fled; when Dr. Knapp gives orders in that voice, people jump to it. Dr. Knapp ran out, calling to me to stay where I was until he came back. In spite of the excitement, he actually managed to make his voice gentle.

I went to the window after a moment and looked down. Two medical students were running across the lawn from the south building, and the orderlies with their stretcher, still rolled, were pelting down the path. Dr. Knapp, bag in hand, was close behind them.

Dr. Carstairs and Dr. Greenberg were under the window and already shunting away the few curious visitors who had appeared as if from out of the ground, the way people do after an accident anywhere. But most important of all, I saw Mrs. Stoye's body. It was lying crumped up, directly below me, and there was no doubt of it that her neck was broken and her skull badly fractured. I went and sat down again.

Afterward Dr. Knapp questioned me closely and, I must say, very kindly. I told him nothing about the strange disappearance of the body. I expect he thought I was crying because I felt respon-

sible for the death. He assured me that my record was in my favor, and it was perfectly understandable that I was helpless to stop Mrs. Stoye.

I apparently went quite to pieces then, and Dr. Knapp suggested that I take my two weeks' leave—it was due in another twenty days in any case—immediately, and rest up and forget this thing.

I said, "Perhaps I will."

I went out to the Quarters to bathe and change. And now I had better say how I *felt* during all this. . . .

I was terrified when Mrs. Stoye jumped. When I reached the window right afterward, I was exactly as excited as one might expect.

But the instant I looked down, something happened. It wasn't anything I can describe, except to say that there was a change of attitude. That doesn't seem to mean much, does it? Well, I can only say this; that from that moment I was no longer frightened nor shocked nor horrified nor anything else. I remember putting my hands up to my mouth, and I must have given a perfect picture of a terrified nurse.

I was actually quite calm. I was quite cool as I ran to the bell and then out onto the hall. I collapsed, I cried, I sobbed, I produced a flood of tears and streaks for my face. But during every minute of it I was completely calm.

Now, I knew that was strange, but I felt no surprise at it. I knew that it could be called dishonest. I don't know how to analyze it. I am a nurse, and a profound sense of duty has been drilled into me for years. I felt that it was my duty to cry, to say nothing about the disappearance of the body, to get the two weeks leave immediately, and to do the other things which I have done and must do.

While I bathed I thought. I was still calm, and I suppose I behaved calmly; it didn't matter, for there was no one to see.

Two people had seen Mrs. Stoye jump besides myself. I realized that I must see them. I didn't think about the disappearing body. I didn't feel I had to, somehow, any more than one thinks consciously of the water in the pipes and heaters as one draws a bath. The thing was there, and needed no investigation.

But it was necessary to see that man and the boy. What I must do when I saw them required no thought either. That seemed all arranged, unquestionable, so evident that it needed no thought or definition.

I put away the white stockings and shoes with a feeling of relief, and slipped into underthings with a bit of lace on them, and sheer hose. I put on my wine rayon with the gored skirt, and the matching shoes. I combed my hair out and put it up in a roll around the back, cool and out of the way. Money,

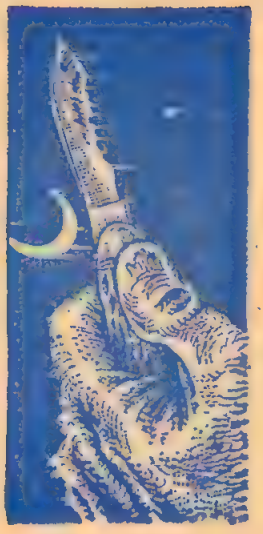
keys, cigarette case, knife, lighter, compact. All ready.

I went round by the administration offices, thinking hard. A man visits the hospital with his boy—it was probably his boy—and leaves the boy outside while he goes in. He would be seeing a wife, in all probability. He'd leave the boy outside only if the woman's condition were serious or if she were immediately post-operative or post-partem.

So many patients go in and out that I naturally don't remember too many of them; on the other hand, I can almost always tell a new patient or visitor . . . marvelous the way the mind, unbidden, clocks and catalogs, to some degree, all that passes before it. . . .

The chances were that these people, the man and the boy, were visiting a new patient. Maternity would be as good a guess as any, to start with.

It was well after nine o'clock, the evening of Mrs. Stoye's death, and the administration offices were deserted except for Miss Kaye, the night registrar. It was not unusual for nurses to check up occasionally on patients. I nodded to Miss Kaye and went back to the files. The maternity admission file gave me five names for the previous two days. I got the five cards out of the patients alphabetical and glanced over them. Two of these new mothers had other children; a Mrs. Korff, with three sons and a daughter at home, and a Mrs. Daniels, who had one son. Here: "Previous children: One. Age this date: 14 yrs. 3 months." And further down: "Father age: 41."



It looked like a bull's-eye. I remember feeling inordinately pleased with myself, as if I had assisted particularly well in an operation, or had done a bang-up job of critical first-aid.

I copied down the address of the Daniels family, and, carefully replacing all the cards, made my vacation checkout and left the building.

It seemed late to go calling, but I knew that I must. There had been a telephone number on the card, but I had ignored it. What I must do could not be done over the phone.

I found the place fairly easily, although it was a long way out in the suburbs on the other side of the town. It was a small, comfortable-

looking place, set well back from the road, and with wide lawns and its own garage. I stepped up on the porch and quite shamelessly looked inside.

The outer door opened directly into the living room, without a foyer. There was a plate-glass panel in the door with a sheer curtain on the inside. I could see quite clearly. The room was not too large—fireplace, wainscoting, stairway in the left corner, big easy-chairs, a studio-couch—that sort of thing. There was a torn newspaper tossed on the arm of one fireside chair. Two end-table lamps were lit. There was no one in the room.

I RANG the bell, waited, rang again, peering in. Soon I saw a movement on the stairs. It was the boy thin-looking and touseled, thumping down the carpeted steps, tying the cord of a dark-red dressing gown as he came. On the landing he stopped.

I could just hear him call "Dad!" He leaned over the banister, looking up and back. He called again, shrugged a shrug which turned into a stretch, and, yawning, came to the door. I hid the knife in my sleeve.

"Oh!" he said, startled, as he opened the door. Unaccountably, I felt a wave of nausea. Getting a grip on myself, I stepped inside before I spoke. He stood looking at me, flushing, a bit conscious, I think, of his bare feet, for he stood on one of them, trying to curl the toes of the other one out of sight.

"Daniels. . . ." I murmured.

"Yes," he said. "I'm Ronald Daniels." He glanced quickly back into the room. "Dad doesn't seem to be . . . I don't . . . I was asleep."

"I'm so sorry."

"Gosh, that's all right," he said. He was a sweet little chap, not a man yet, not a child—less and less of a child as he woke up, which he was doing slowly. He smiled. "Come in. Let me have your coat. Dad ought to be here now. Maybe he went for cigarettes or something."

It was as if a switch had been thrown and a little sign had lit up within him— "Remember your manners."

Abruptly I felt the strangest compulsion—a yearning, a warming toward this lad. It was completely a sexual thing, mind you—completely. But it was as if a part of me belonged to a part of him . . . no; more the other way round. I don't know. It can't be described. And with the feeling, I suddenly knew that it was all right, it was all quite all right.

I did not have to see Mr. Daniels after all. That business would be well taken care of when the time came, and not by me. Better—much better—for him to do it.

He extended his hand for my

coat. "Thank you *so* much," I said, smiling, liking him—more than liking him, in this indefinable way — "but I really must go. I—if your father—" How could I say it? How could I let him know that it was different now; that everything might be spoiled if his father knew I had come here? "I mean, when your father comes back. . . ."

Startlingly, he laughed. "Please don't worry," he said. "I won't tell him you were here."

I looked at his face, his round, bland face, so odd with his short slender frame. That thing like a sense of duty told me not to ask, but I violated it. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

He shook his head. "Not really. But it doesn't matter. I won't tell Dad."

"Good," I smiled, and left.

IV

As Told By

JENNIE BEAUFORT

YOU never know what you're going to run up against when you're an information operator, I mean really, people seem to have the craziest idea of what we're there for. Like the man called up the other day and wanted to know how you spell conscientious — "Just conscientious," he says "I know how to spell objector" and I gave him the singsong, you know, the voice with a smile, "I'm soreee! We haven't that infor*may*—shun!" and keyed him out, thinking to myself, what a schmoe. (I told Mr. Parker, he's my super, and he grinned and said it was a sign of the times; Mr. Parker's always making jokes.) And like the other man wants to know if he gets a busy signal and hangs on to the line, will the signal stop and the bell ring when the party he is calling hangs up.

I want to say to him, what do you think I am, Alexander Graham Bell or something, maybe Don Ameche, instead of which I tell him "One moment, sir, and I will get that information for you?" (not that I'm asking a question, you raise your voice that way because it leaves the customers breathless) and I nudge Sue and she tells me, Sue knows everything.

Not that everything like that comes over the wire, anything is liable to happen right there in the office or in the halls to say nothing of the stage-door Johnnies with hair oil and cellophane boxes who ask all the girls if they are Operator 23, she has such a nice voice.

Like the kid that was in here yesterday, not that he was on the prowl, he was too young, though five years from now he'll be just dreamy, with his cute round face and his long legs. Mr. Parker brought him in to me and told me the kid was getting up a talk on telephones for his civics class in high school, and tells the kid to just

ask Miss Beaufort anything he wants to know and walks off rubbling his hands, which I can understand because he has made me feel good and made the kid feel good and has me doing all the work while he gets all the credit.

Not that I felt good just at that particular moment, my stomach did a small flip-flop but that has nothing to do with it; it must have been the marshmallow cake I had for my lunch, I should remember to keep away from the marshmallow when I have gravy-and-mashed, at least on weekdays.

Anyway this kid was cute, with his pleases and his thank you's and his little almost-bows-from-the-waist like a regular Lord Calvert. He asked me all sorts of questions and all smart too, but he never asked them right out, I mean, he would say, "Please tell me how you can find a number so *fast?*" and then listen to every word I said and squiggle something down in his notebook. I showed him the alphabeticals and the central indexes and the assonance file (and you can bet I called it by its full name to that nice youngster) where we find out that a number for Meyer, say, is listed as Maior. And he wanted to know why it was that we never give a street address to someone who has the phone number, but only the other way around, and how we found out the phone number from just the street address.

So I showed him the street index and the checking index, which has the numbers all in order by exchanges with the street addresses, which is what we use to trace calls when we have to. And lots more. And finally he said he wanted to pretend he was me for a minute, to see if he understood everything. He even blushed when he said it. I told him to go ahead and got up and let him sit down. He sat there all serious and bright-eyed, and said, "Now, suppóse I am you, and someone wanst to know the number of—uh—Fred Zimmerman, who lives out at Bell Hill, but they have no street number."

And I showed him how to flip out the alphabetical, and how to ask the customer which one he wants if there should be more than one Fred Zimmerman. He listened so carefully and politely, and made a note in his book. Then he asked me what happens if the police or somebody has a phone number and wants the address, we'll say, out in Homeland, like Homeland 2050. I showed him the numerical index, and he whipped it out and opened it like an old hand. My, he caught on quickly. He made another note in his book . . . well, it went on like that, and inside of twenty minutes.

I bet he could take over from me any time and not give Mr. Parker a minute's worry, which is more than I can say for some of the girls who have been working here for

years, like that Patty Mawson with her blonde hair and her awful New Look.

Well, that boy picked my brains dry in short order, and he got up and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss my hand like a Frenchman or a European, but he didn't. He just thanked me as if I had given him the crown jewels or my hand in marriage, and went out to do the same for Mr. Parker, and all I can say is, I wish one-tenth of the customers showed as much good house breaking.

V

As Told By

HELMUTH STOYE

GRACE . . .Grace . . . *Grace!*

Oh, my darling, my gentle, my soft little bird with the husky voice. Miss Funny-Brows. Little Miss Teeth. You used to laugh such a special laugh when I made up new names for you, Coral-cache, Cadenza, Viola-voice . . . and you'll never laugh again, because I killed you.

I killed you, I killed you.

Yesterday I stopped all the clocks.

I couldn't stand it. It was wrong; it was a violation. You were dead. I drew the blinds and sat in the dark, not really believing that it had happened—how *could* it happen? You're *Grace,* you're the humming in the kitchen, the quick footfalls in the foyer as I come up the porch steps.

I think for a while I believed that your coming back was the most real, the most obvious thing; in a moment, any moment, you would come in and kiss the nape of my neck; you would be smelling of vanilla and cut flowers, and you'd laugh at me and together we'd fling up the blinds and let in the light.

And then Tinkle struck—Tinkle, the eight-foot grandfather's clock with the *basso profundo* chime. That was when I knew what was real. It was real that you were dead, it was real. . . .

I got angry at that violation, that sacrilege, that clock. What right had the clock to strike, the hands to move? How could it go on? It was wrong. I got up and stopped it. I think I spoke to it, not harshly, angry as I was; I said, "You don't know, do you, Tinkle? No one's told you yet," and I caught it by its swinging neck and held it until its ticking brain was quiet.

I told all the clocks, one by one, that you were dead—the glowing Seth Thomas ship's clock, with its heavy threads and its paired syllables, and Drowsy the alarm, and the cuckoo with the cleft palate who couldn't say anything but "hook-who!"

A truck roared by outside, and I remember the new surge of fury because of it, and then the thought that the driver hadn't been told yet

. . . and then the mad thought that the news would spread from these silent clocks, from these drawn blinds, spread like a cloud-shadow over the world, and when it touched birds, they would glide to the ground and crouch motionless, with no movement in their jewelled eyes; when it touched machines, they would slow and stop; when it touched flowers they would close themselves into little soft fists and bend to knuckle the earth; when it touched people they would finish that stride, end that sentence, slowing, softening, and would sink down and be still.

There would be no noise or confusion as the world slipped into its stasis, and nothing would grow but silence. And the sun would hang on the horizon with its face thickly veiled, and there would be eternal dusk.

That was yesterday, and I was angry. I am not angry today. It was better, yesterday, the sitting in turmoil and uselessness, the useless raging up and down rooms so hollow, yet still so full of you they would not echo. It got dark, you see, and in good time the blinds were brighter than the walls around them again. I looked out, squinting through grainy eyelids, and saw a man walking by, walking easily, his hands in his pockets, and he was whistling.

After that I could not be angry any more, not at the man, not at the morning. I knew only the great cruel pressure of a fact, a fact worse than the fact of emptiness or of death—the fact that nothing ever stops, that things must go on.

It was better to be angry, and to lose myself in uselessness. Now I am not angry and I have no choice but to think usefully. I have lived a useful life and have built it all on useful thinking, and if I had not thought so much and so carefully Grace would be here with me now, with her voice like a large soft breeze in some springtime place, and perhaps tickling the side of my neck with feather-touches of her moving lips . . . it was my useful, questing, thirsty thought which killed her, killed her.

The accident was all of two years ago—almost two years, anyway. We had driven all the way back from Springfield without stopping, and we were very tired. Grace and Mr. Share and I were squeezed into the front seat.

Mr. Share was a man Grace had invented long before, even before we were married. He was a big invisible fat man who always sat by the right-hand window, and always looked out to the side so that he never watched us.

But since he was so fat, Grace had to press up close to me as we drove.

THERE was a stake-bodied truck bowling along ahead of us, and in the back of it was a spry old man, or perhaps a weatherbeaten young

man—you couldn't tell—in blue dungarees and a red shirt. He had a yellow woolen muffler tied around his waist, and the simple strip of material made all the difference between "clothes" and "costume."

Behind him, lashed to the bed of the truck just back of the cab, was a large bundle of burlap. It would have made an adequate seat for him, cushioned and out of the wind. But the man seemed to take the wind as a heady beverage and the leaping floor as a challenge.

He stood with his arms away from his sides and his knees slightly flexed, and rode the truck as if it were a live thing. He yielded himself to each lurch and bump, brought himself back with each recession, guarding his equilibrium with an easy virtuosity.

Grace was, I think, dozing; my shout of delighted laughter at the performance on the bounding stage before us brought her upright. She laughed with me for the laugh alone, for she had not looked through the windshield yet, and she kissed my cheek.

He saw her do it, the man on the truck, and he laughed with us.

"He's *our* kind of people," Grace said.

"A pixie," I agreed, and we laughed again.

The man took off an imaginary plumed hat, swung it low toward us, but very obviously toward Grace. She nodded back to him, with a slight sidewise turn of her face as it went down that symbolized a curtsey.

Then he held out his elbow, and the pose, the slightly raised shoulder over which he looked fondly at the air over his bent arm, showed that he had given his arm to a lady. The lady was Grace, who, of course, would be charmed to join him in the dance . . . she clapped her hands and crowed with delight, as she watched her imaginary self with the courtly, colorful figure ahead.

The man stepped with dainty dignity to the middle of the truck and bowed again, and you could all but hear the muted minuet as it began. It was a truly wonderful thing to watch, this pantomine; the man knew the ancient, stately steps to perfection, and they were unflawed by the careening surface on which they were performed. There was no mockery in the miming, but simply the fullness of good, the sheer, unspoiled sharing of a happy magic.

He bowed, he took her hand, smiled back into her eyes as she pirouetted behind him. He stood back to the line waiting his turn, nodding slightly to the music; he dipped ever so little, twice, as his turn came, and stepped gracefully out to meet her, smiling again.

I don't know what made me look up. We were nearing the Speedway Viaduct, and the truck ahead was just about to pass under it. High up over our heads was the great span, and as my eyes followed its curve, to see the late afternoon sun on the

square guard-posts which bounded the elevated road, three of the posts exploded outward, and the blunt nose of a heavy truck plowed through and over the edge, to slip and catch and slip again, finally to teeter to a precarious stop.

Apparently its trailer was loaded with light steel girders; one of them slipped over the tractor's crumpled shoulder and speared down toward us.

Our companion of the minuet, on the truck ahead, had finished his dance, and, turned to us, was bowing low, smiling, looking up through his eyebrows at us. The girder's end took him on the back of the head. It did not take the head off; it obliterated it. The body struck flat and lay still, as still as wet paper stuck to glass. The girder bit a large piece out of the tailgate and somersaulted to the right, while I braked and swerved dangerously away from it. Fortunately there were no cars coming toward us.

There was, of course, a long, mixed-up, horrified sequence of the two truckdrivers, the one ahead and the one who came down later from the viaduct and was sick. Ambulances and bystanders and a lot of talk . . . none of it matters, really.

No one ever found out who the dead man was. He had no luggage and no identification; he had been hitch-hiking, and he had over ninety dollars in his pocket. He might have been anybody—someone from show business, or a writer perhaps, on a haywire vacation of his own wild devising. I suppose that doesn't matter either. What does matter is that he died while Grace was in a very close communion with what he was doing, and her mind was wide open for his fantasy. Mine is, generally, I suppose; but at that particular moment, when I had seen the smash above and the descending girder, I was wide awake, on guard. I think that had a lot to do with what has happened since. I think it has everything to do with Grace's—with Grace's—

There is no word for it. I can say this, though. Grace and I were never alone together again until the day she died. Died, died, Grace is dead.

Grace!

I CAN GO on with my accursed useful thinking now, I suppose.

Grace was, of course, badly shaken, and I did what I could for her over the next few weeks. I tried my best to understand how it was affecting her. (That's what I mean by useful thinking—trying to understand. Trying and trying—prying and prying. Arranging, probing, finding out. Getting a glimpse, a scent of danger, rooting it out—bringing it out into the open where it can get at you.) Rest and new clothes and alcohol rubdowns; the theater, music and music, always music, for she could lose herself in

it, riding its flux, feeling and folding herself in it, following it, sometimes, with her hushed, true voice, sometimes lying open to it, letting it play its colors and touches over her.

There is always an end to patience, however. After two months, knowing her as I did, I knew that there was more here than simple shock. If I had known her less well —if I had cared less, even, it couldn't have mattered.

It began with small things. There were abstractions which were unusual in so vibrant a person. In a quiet room, her face would listen to music; sometimes I had to speak twice and then repeat what I had said.

Once I came home and found supper not started, the bed not made. Those things were not important—I am not a fusspot nor an autocrat; but I was shaken when, after calling her repeatedly I found her in the guest room, sitting on the bed without lights. I had no idea she was in there; I just walked in and snapped on the light in the beginnings of panic because she seemed not to be in the house; she had not answered me.

And at first it was as if she had not noticed the sudden yellow blaze from the paired lamps; she was gazing at the wall, and on her face was an expression of perfect peace. She was wide awake—at least her eyes were. I called her: "Grace!"

"Hello, darling," she said quietly. Her head turned casually toward me and she smiled—oh, those perfect teeth of hers!—and her smile was only partly for me; the rest of it was inside, with the nameless things with which she had been communing.

I sat beside her, amazed, and took her hands. I suppose I spluttered a bit, "Grace, are you all right? Why didn't you answer? The bed's not—have you been out? What's happened? Here—let me see if you have a fever."

Her eyes were awake, yes; but not awake to me, to here and now. They were awake and open to some *elsewhere* matters. . . . She acquiesced as I felt her forehead and cheeks for fever, and while I was doing it I could see the attention of those warm, pleased, living eyes shifting from the things they had been seeing, to me. It was as if they were watching a scene fade out while another was brought in on a screen, so that for a second all focussing points on the first picture were lost, and there was a search for a focussing point on the second.

And then, apparently, the picture of Helmuth Stoye sitting next to her, holding one of her hands, running his right palm across her forehead and down her cheek, came into sharp, true value, and she said, "Darling! You're home! What happened? Holiday or strike? You're not sick?"

I said, "Sweetheart, it's after seven."

"No!" She rose, smoothed her

hair in front of the mirror. Hers was a large face and her appeal had none of the doll-qualities, the candy-and-peaches qualities of the four-color ads. Her brow and cheekbones were wide and strong, and the hinges of her jaw were well-marked, hollowed underneath. Her nostrils were flared and sensuously tilted and her shoulders too wide to be suitable for fashion plates or pin-ups. But clothes hung from those shoulders with the graceful majesty of royal capes, and her breasts were large, high, separated and firm.

Yet for all her width and flatness and strength, for all her powerfully-set features, she was woman all through; and with clothes or without, she looked it.

She said, "I had no idea . . . after seven! Oh, darling, I'm sorry. You poor thing, and no dinner yet. Come help me," and she dashed out of the room, leaving me flapping my lips, calling, "But Grace! Wait! Tell me first what's the mat—"

And when I got to the kitchen she was whipping up a dinner, efficiently, deftly, and all my questions could wait, could be interrupted with "Helmuth, honey, open these, will you?" "I don't know, b'loved; we'll dig it out after supper. Will you see if there're any French-fries in the freezer?"

And afterward she remembered that "The Pearl" was playing at the Ascot Theater, and we'd missed it when it first came to town, and this was the best night . . . we went, and the picture was fine, and we talked of nothing else that night.

I could have forgotten about that episode, I suppose. I could have forgotten about any one of them—the time she turned her gaze so strangely inward when she was whipping cream, and turned it to butter because she simply forgot to stop whipping it when it was ready; the times she had the strong, uncharacteristic urges to do and feel things which had never interested her before—to lose herself in distances from high buildings and tall hills, to swim under water for long, frightening minutes; to hear new and ever new kinds of music—saccharine foxtrots and atonal string quartets, arrangements for percussion alone and oriental modes.

And foods—rattlesnake ribs, moo goo gai pan, curried salmon with green rice, *Paella,* with its chicken and clams, head-cheese, *canolas,* sweet-and-pungent pork; all these Grace made herself, and well.

But in food as in music, in new sensualities as in new activities, there was no basic change in Grace. These were additions only; for all the exoticism of the dishes, for example, we still had and enjoyed the things she had always made—the gingered leg of lamb, the acorn-squash filled with creamed onions, the crêpes suzettes.

She could still be lost in the ar-

chitecture of Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue" and in the raw heartbeat of the Haggard-Bauduc "Big Noise from Winnetka." Because she had this new passion for underwater swimming, she did not let it take from her enjoyment of highboard diving. Her occasional lapses from efficiency, as in the whipped-cream episode, were rare and temporary. Her sometime dreaminess, when she would forget appointments and arrangements and time itself, happened so seldom that, in all justice, they could have been forgotten, or put down, with all my vaunted understanding, to some obscure desire for privacy, for aloneness.

So—she had everything she had always had, and now more. She was everything she always had been, and now more. She did everything she had always done, and now more. Then what, what on earth and in heaven, was I bothered, worried, and—and afraid of?

I know now. It was jealousy. It was—one of the jealousies.

There wasn't Another Man. That kind of poison springs from insecurity—from the knowledge that there's enough wrong with you that the chances are high that another man—any other man—could do a better job than you in some department of your woman's needs. Besides, that kind of thing can never be done by the Other Man alone; your woman must cooperate, wilfully and consciously, or it can't happen. And Grace was incapable of that.

No; it was because of the sharing we had had. My marriage was a magic one because of what we shared; because of our ability to see a red-gold leaf, exchange a glance, and say never a word, for we knew so well each other's pleasure, its causes and expressions and associations. The pleasures were not the magic; the sharing was.

A POOR analogy: you have a roommate who is a very dear friend, and together you have completely redecorated your room. The colors, the lighting, the concealed shelves and drapes, all are a glad communion of your separated tastes. You are both proud and fond of your beautiful room . . . and one day you come home and find a new television set. Your roommate has acquired it and brought it in to surprise you. You are surprised, and you are happy, too.

But slowly an ugly thing creeps into your mind. The set is a big thing, an important, dominating thing in the room and in the things for which you use the room. And it is *his*—not mine or ours, but *his*. There is his unspoken, undemanded authority in the choice of programs in the evenings; and where are the chess-games, the folk-singing with your guitar, the long hours of phonograph music?

They are there, of course, ready for you every moment; no one has

taken them away. But now the room is different. It can continue to be a happy room; only a petty mind would resent the new shared riches; but the fact that the *source* of the riches is not shared, was not planned by you both. This changes the room and everything in it, the colors, the people, the shape and warmth.

SO WITH my marriage. A thing had come to Grace which made us both richer but I did not share that source; and damn, damn my selfishness, I could not bear it; if I could not share it I wanted her deprived of it. I was gentle; beginning with "How do you feel, sweetheart? But you aren't all right; what were you thinking of? It couldn't be 'nothing' . . . you were giving more attention to it than you are to me right now!"

I was firm; beginning with, "Now look, darling; there's something here that we have to face. Please help. Now, exactly why are you so interested in hearing that Hindemith sketch? You never used to be interested in music like that. It has no melody, no key, no rhythm; it's unpredictable and ugly. I'm quoting you, darling; that's what you used to say about it. And now you want to soak yourself in it. Why? Why? What has changed you? Yes—people must grow and change; I know that. But—growing so fast, so quickly, in so many different directions! Tell me, now. Tell me exactly why you feel moved to hear this thing at this time."

And—I was angry, beginning with, "Grace! Why didn't you answer me? Oh, you heard me, did you? What did I say? Yes; that's right; you did . . . then why didn't you answer? Well? Not important? You'll have to realize that it's important to me to be answered when I speak to you!"

She tried. I could see her trying. I wouldn't stop. I began to watch her every minute. I stopped waiting for openings, and made them myself. I trapped her. I put on music in which I knew she would be lost, and spoke softly, and when she did not answer, I would kick over my chair with a shout and demand that she speak up. She tried. . . . Sometimes she was indignant, and demanded the peace that should be her right. Once I struck her.

That did it. Oh, the poor, brutalized beloved!

Now I can see it; *now!*

She never could answer me, until the one time. What could she have said? Her "I don't know!" was the truth. Her patience went too far, her anger not far enough, and I know that her hurt was without limits.

I struck her, and she answered my questions. I was even angrier after she had than I had been before, for I felt that she had known all along, that until now she had withheld what she knew; and I cursed myself for not using force

earlier and more often. I did. For not hitting *Grace* before!

I came home that night tired, for there was trouble at the shop; I suppose I was irascible with the compositors, but that was only because I had not slept well the night before, which was because—anyway, when I got home, I slammed the door, which was not usual, and, standing there with my raincoat draped over one shoulder, looking at the beautiful spread on the coffee table in front of the fireplace, I demanded, "What's that for?"

There were canapes and dainty round and rolled and triangular sandwiches; a frosty bluish beverage twinkling with effervescence in its slender pitcher; there were stars and flowers of tiny pickles, pastes and dressings, a lovely coral potato-chip, and covered dishes full of delicate mysteries. There were also two small and vivid bowls of cut blooms, beautifully arranged.

"Why, for us. Just for us two," she said.

I said, "Good God. Is there anything the matter with sitting up to a table and eating like a human being?" Then I went to hang up the coat.

She had not moved when I came back; she was still standing facing the door, and perhaps a quarter of her welcoming smile was frozen on her face.

No, I said to myself, no you don't. Don't go soft, now. You have her on the run; let's break this thing up now, all at once, all over the place. The healing can come later. I said "Well?"

She turned to me, her eyes full of tears. "Helmuth . . ." she said weakly. I waited. "Why did you . . . it was only a surprise. A pretty surprise for you. We haven't been together for so long . . . you've been . . ."

"You haven't been yourself since that accident," I said coldly. "I think you like being different. Turn off the tears, honey. They'll do you no good."

"I'm *not* different!" she wailed; and then she began to cry in earnest. "I can't stand it!" she moaned, "I can't, I can't . . . Helmuth, you're losing your mind. I'm going to leave you. Leave you . . . maybe for just a while, maybe for . . ."

"You're going to *what?*" I whispered, going very close to her.

She made a supreme effort and answered, flatly, looking me in the eye, "I'm going, Helmuth. I've got to."

I think if she'd seen it coming she would have stood back; perhaps I'd have missed her. I think that if she'd expected it, she would have fled after I hit her once. Instead she stood still, unutterably shocked, unmoving, so it was easy to hit her again.

She stood watching me, her face dead, her eyes, and, increasingly, the flames of the fingermarks on her bleached cheeks, burning. In that instant I knew how she felt, what

her mind was trying frantically to do.

She was trying to think of a way to make this a dream, to explain it as an accident, to find some excuse for me; and the growing sting in her beaten cheeks slowly proved and reproved that it was true. I know this, because the tingling sting of my hands was proving it to me.

Finally she put one hand up to her face. She said, *"Why?"*

I said, "Because you have kept a secret from me."

She closed her eyes, swayed. I did not touch her. Still with her eyes closed, she said:

"It wants to be left alone. It feeds on vital substance, but there is always an excess . . . there is in a healthy person, anyway. It only takes a small part of that excess, not enough to matter, not enough for anyone but a jealous maniac like you to notice. It lives happily in a happy person, it lives richly in a mind rich with the experiences of the senses, feeding only on what is spare and extra. And you have made me unfit, forever and ever, with your prodding and scarring, and because you have found it out it can never be left alone again, it can never be safe again, it can never be safe while you live, it can never be content, it can never leave me while I live, it can never, it can never, it can never."

Her voice did not trail off—it simply stopped, without a rise or fall in pitch or volume, without any normal human aural punctuation. What she said made no sense to me.

I snarled at her—I don't think it was a word—and turned my back. I heard her fall, and when I looked she was crumpled up like a castoff, empty, trodden-on white paper box.

I FOUGHT my battle between fury and tenderness that night, and met the morning with the dull conclusion that Grace was possessed, and that what had possessed her had gone mad . . . that I didn't know where I was, what to do; that I must save her if I could, but in any case relentlessly track down and destroy the—the—No, it hadn't a name . . .

Grace was conscious, docile, and had nothing to say. She was not angry or resentful; she was nothing but—obedient. She did what she was told, and when she finished she stopped until she was told to do something else.

I called in Doc Knapp. He said that what was mostly wrong with her was outside the field of a medical doctor, but he didn't think a little regimented rest and high-powered food therapy would hurt.

I let him take her to the hospital. I think I was almost glad to see her go. No I wasn't. I couldn't be glad. How could I be glad about anything? Anyway, Knapp would have her rested and fed and quieted down and fattened up and supplied with two alcohol rubs a day, until

she was fit to start some sort of psycho-therapy. She always liked alcohol rubs. She killed her—she died just before the second alcohol rub, on the fourth day . . . Knapp said, when he took her away, "I can't understand it, Helmuth. It's like shock, but in Grace that doesn't seem right at all. She's too strong, too alive."

Not any more, she isn't.

My mind's wandering. Hold on tight, you . . . Hold. . . .

Where am I? I am at home. I am sitting in the chair. I am getting up. Uh! I have fallen down. Why did I fall down? Because my leg was asleep. Why was it asleep? Because I have been sitting here all day and most of the night without moving. The doorbell is ringing. Why is the doorbell ringing? Because someone wants to come in. Who is it? Someone who comes visiting at two o' eight in the morning, I know that because I started the clock again and Tinkle says what time it is. Who visits at two o' eight in the morning? Drunks and police and death. There is a small person's shadow on the frosted door, which I open, "Hello, small person, Grace is dead."

It is not a drunk it is not the police it is Death who has a child's long lashes and small hands, one to hold up a blank piece of paper for me to stare at, one to slide the knife between my ribs, feel it scrape on my breastbone . . . a drama, Enter Knife Left Center, and I fall back away from the door, my blood leaping lingering after the withdrawn blade, Grace, Grace, treasure me in your cupped hands—

VI

As Told By

LAWRENCE DELEHANTY

I GOT THE call on the car radio just before half-past two. Headquarters had a phone tip of some funny business out on Poplar Street in Homeland. The fellow who phoned was a milk-truck dispatcher on his way to work. He says he thought he saw someone at the door of this house stab the guy who came to the door, close the door and beat it.

I didn't see anyone around. There were lights on in the house—in what seemed to be the living room, and in the hallway just inside the door. I could see how anyone passing by could get a look at such a thing if it had happened.

I told Sam to stay in the prowl-car and ran up the path to the house.

I knocked on the door, figuring maybe there'd be prints on the bell-push. There was no answer. I tried again, and finally opened the door, turning the knob by the shaft, which was long enough for me to get hold of without touching the knob.

It had happened all right. The stiff was just inside the door. The

guy was on his back, arms and legs spread out, with the happiest look on his face I ever saw. No kidding —that guy looked as if he'd just been given a million dollars. He had blood all over his front.

I took one look and went back and called Sam. He came up asking questions and stopped asking when he saw the stiff. "Go phone," I told him, "and be careful. Don't touch nothin'."

While he was phoning I took a quick squint around. There was a few dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and on the table, and half a bottle of some liqueur on an end-table in the living room, sitting right on the polished wood, where it'd sure leave a ring. I'd say this guy had been in there some time without trying to clean up any.

I inched open the drawer in the big sideboard in the dining room and all the silver was there. None of the drawers in the two bedrooms were open; it looked like a grudge-killing of some kind; there wasn't no robbery I could see.

Just as I came back down the stairs the doorbell rang. Sam came out of the front room and I waved him back. "There goes our prints on the bell," I said. "I'll get it." I pussyfooted to the door and pulled it wide open, real sudden.

"Mr. Stoye?" says a kid standing there. He's about fourteen, maybe, small for his age. He's standing out there, three o'clock in the morning, mind you, smiling real polite, just like it was afternoon and he'd come around to sell raffle tickets. I felt a retch starting in my stomach just then—don't know why. The sight of the stiff hadn't bothered me none. Maybe something I ate. I swallowed it down and said, "Who are you?"

He said, "I would like to see Mr. Stoye."

"Bub," I said, "Mr. Stoye isn't seeing anybody just now. What do you want?"

He squinted around me and saw the stiff. I guess I should've stopped him but he had me off-guard. And you know, he didn't gasp or jump back or any of the things you expect anyone to do. He just straightened up, and he smiled.

"Well," he says, sort of patting his jacket pocket, "I don't s'pose there's anything I can do now," and he smiles at me, real bright. "Well, good night," he says, and turns to go.

I nabbed him and spun him inside and shut the door. "What do you know about this?" I asked him.

He looked at the stiff, where I nodded, and he looked at me. The stiff didn't bother him.

"Why, nothing," he said. "I don't know anything at all. Is that really Mr. Stoye?"

"You know it is."

"I think I did know, all right," he said. "Well, can I go home now? Dad doesn't know I'm out."

"I bet he doesn't. Let's see what you got in your pockets."

He didn't seem to mind. I frisked him. Inside the jacket pocket was a jump-knife—one of those Army issue paratrooper's clasp-knives with a spring; touch the button and *click!* you've got four and a half inches of razor-steel sticking out of your fist, ready for business. A lot of 'em got out in war surplus. Too many. We're always finding 'em in carcasses.

I told him he'd have to stick around. He frowned a little bit and said he was worried about his father, but I didn't let that make no difference. He gave his name without any trouble. His name was Ronnie Daniels. He was a clean-cut little fellow, just as nice and polite as I ever saw.

Well, I asked him all kinds of questions. His answers just didn't make no sense. He said he couldn't recall just what it was he wanted to see Stoye about. He said he had never met Stoye and had never been out here before. He said he got the address from knowing the phone number; went right up to the telephone company and wormed it out of one of the girls there. He said he didn't remember at all where he got the number from. I looked at the number just out of curiosity; it was Homeland 2065, which didn't mean nothing to me.

After that there wasn't anything to do until the homicide squad got there. I knew the kid's old man, this Daniels, would have to get dragged into it, but that wasn't for me to do; that would be up to the detective looey. I turned the kid over to Sam.

I remember Sam's face just then; it turned pale. I asked him what was the matter but he just swallowed hard and said he didn't know; maybe it was the pickles he had with his midnight munch. He took the kid into the front room and they got into a fine conversation about cops and murders. He sure seemed to be a nice, healthy, normal kid. Quiet and obedient—you know. I can't really blame Sam for what happened.

The squad arrived—two carloads, sirens and all, making so much noise I thought sure Stoye would get up and tell 'em to let him rest in peace—and in they came—photogs, print men, and the usual bunch of cocky plainclothes men. They swarmed all over.

Flick was the man in charge, stocky, tough, mad at everybody all the time, especially on the night detail. Man, how he hated killers that worked at night and dragged him away from his pinochle!

I told the whole story to him and his little book.

"His name's Tommy," I said, "and he says he lives at—"

"His name's Ronnie," says Sam, from behind me.

"Hey," I says. "I thought I told you to stay with him."

"I had to go powder my nose," says Sam. "My stomach done a flip-flop a while back that had me

worried. It's okay. Brown was dusting in the room there when I went out. And besides, that's a nice little kid. He wouldn't—"

"Brown!" Flick roared.

Brown came out of the living room. "Yeah, Chief."

"You done in the front room?"

"Yeah; everything I could think of. No prints except Stoye's, except on the phone. I guess they'd be Sam's."

"The kid's all right?"

"Was when I left," said Brown, and went back into the living room. Flick and me and Sam went into the front room.

The kid was gone.

Sam turned pale.

"Ronnie!" he bellows. "Hey you, Ronnie!"

No answer.

"You hadda go powder your big fat nose," says Flick to Sammy. Sam looked bad. The soft seats in a radio car feel awful good to a harness bull, and I think Sam decided right then that he'd be doing his job on foot for quite a while.

It was easy to see what had happened. Sammy left the room, and then Brown got finished and went out, and in those few seconds he was alone the kid had stepped through the short hall into the kitchen and out the side door.

Sam looked even worse when I suddenly noticed that the ten-inch ham slicer was gone from the knife-rack; that was one of the first things I looked at after I saw Stoye had been stabbed. You always look for the kitchen knives in a home stabbing.

Flick turned to Sam and opened his mouth, and in that moment, believe me, I was glad I was me and not him. I thought fast.

"Flick," I said, "I know where that kid's going. He was all worried about what his old man would think. Here—I got his address in my book."

Flick snapped, "Okay. Get down there right away. I'll call what's-his-name—Daniels—from here and tell him to wait for the kid and hold him if he shows up before you do. Get down there, now, and hurry Keep your eyes peeled on the way; you might see him on the street. Look out for that knife. Kelly, get a general alarm out for that kid soon's I'm off the phone. Or send it from your car."

He turned back to me, thumbed at Sam. "Take him with you," he says, "I want him out of my sight. And if his hot damned nose gets shiny again see he don't use your summons-book."

We ran out and piled into the car and took off. We didn't go straight to Daniels' address. Sam hoped we would see the kid on the way; I think he had some idea of a heroic hand-to-hand grapple with the kid in which maybe he'd get a little bit stabbed in line of duty, which might quiet Flick down some.

So we cut back and forth between Myrtle Avenue and Varick;

the kid could've taken a trolley on one or a bus on the other. We found out soon enough that he'd done neither; he'd found a cab; and I'd like to know who it was drove that hack.

He must've been a jet pilot.

It was real dark on Daniels' street. The nearest streetlight was a couple hundred feet away, and there was a big maple tree in Daniels' yard that cast thick black shadow all over the front of the house. I missed the number in the dark and pulled over to the curb; I knew it must be somewhere around here.

Me and Sam got out and Sam went up on the nearest porch to see the house number; Daniels was two doors away. That's how it was we happened to be far to the left of the house when the killer rang Daniels' bell.

We both saw it, Sam and me, that small dark shadow up against Daniels' front door. The door had a glass panel and there was some sort of a night light on inside, so all we saw was the dark blob waiting there, ringing on the bell. I guess Daniels was awake, after Flick's phone call.

I grabbed Sam's arm, and he shook me free. He had his gun out. I said, "What are you gonna do?" He was all hopped up, I guess.

He wanted to make an arrest or something. He wanted to be The Man here. He didn't want to go back on a beat. He said, "You know how Stoye was killed. Just like that."

That made sense, but I said, "Sam! You're not going to shoot a kid!"

"Just wing him, if it looks—"

JUST THEN the door opened. There wasn't much light. I saw Daniels, a stocky, balding man with a very mild face, peering out. I saw an arm come up from that small shadowy blob. Then Sam fired twice. There was a shrill scream, and the clatter of a knife on the porch. I heard Ronnie yell, "Dad! Dad!"

Then Sam and I were pounding over to the house. Daniels was frozen there, staring down onto the porch and the porch steps.

At the foot of the steps the kid was huddled. He was unconscious. The ham-slicer gleamed wickedly on the steps near his hand.

I called out, "Mr. Daniels! We're the police. Better get back inside."

And together Sam and I lifted up the kid. He didn't weigh much. Going inside, Sam tripped over his big flat feet and I swore at him.

We put the kid down on the couch. I didn't see any blood. Daniels was dithering around like an old lady. I pushed him into a chair and told him to stay there and try to take it easy.

Sam went to phone Flick. I started going over the kid.

There was no blood.

There were no holes in him, ei-

ther; not a nick, not a graze. I stood back and scratched my head.

Daniels said, "What's wrong with him? What happened?"

Inside, I heard Sam at the phone. "Yeah, we got 'im. It was the kid all right. Tried to stab his old man. I winged him. Huh? I don't know. We're looking him over now. Yeah."

"Take it easy," I said again to Daniels. He looked rough. "Stay right there."

I went to the door, which was standing open. Over by the porch rail I saw something shining green and steel-blue. I started over to it, tripped on something yielding, and went flat on my face. Sam came running out. "What's the—*uh!*" and he came sailing out and landed on top of me. He's a big boy.

I said, "My goodness, Sam, that was careless of you," or words to that effect, and some other things amounting to maybe Flick had the right idea about him.

"Damn it, Delehanty," he says, "I tripped on something. What are you doing sprawled out here, anyway?"

"I was looking for—" and I picked it up, the green and steel-blue thing. It was a Finnish sheath-knife, long and pointed, double razor-edges, scroll-work up near the hilt. Blood, still a bit tacky, in the scroll-work.

"Where'd that come from?" grunted Sam, and took it. "Hey! Flick just told me the medic says Stoye was stabbed with a two-edged knife. You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose nothin'," I said, getting up. "On your feet, Sam. Flick finds us like this, he'll think we're playing mumblety-peg . . . tell you what, Sam; I took a jump-knife off the kid out there, and it only had a single edge."

I went down the steps and picked it up. Sam pointed out that the kid had never had a chance to use the ham-slicer.

I shrugged that off. Flick was paid the most for thinking—let him do most of the thinking. I went to the side of the door and looked at the bell-push to get an idea as to how it might take prints, and then went inside. Sam came straight in and tripped again.

"Pick up ya feet!"

Sam had fallen to his knees this time. He growled something and, swinging around, went to feeling around the porch floor with his hands. "Now it's patty-cake," I said. "For pete's sake, Sam—"

Inside Daniels was on the floor by the couch, rubbing the kid's hands, saying, real scared like, "Ronnie! Ronnie!"

"Delehanty!"

Half across the room, I turned. Sam was still on his knees just outside the door, and his face was something to see. "Delehanty, just come here, will you?"

There was something in his voice that left no room for a wisecrack. I went right to him. He motioned me

down beside him, took my wrist and pushed my hand downward.

It touched something, but—*there was nothing there*

We looked at each other, and I wish I could write down what that look said.

I touched it again, felt it. It was like cloth, then like flesh, yielding, then bony.

"It's the Invisible Man!" breathed Sam, bug-eyed.

"Stop talking nonsense," I said thickly. "And besides, it's a woman. Look here."

"I'll take your word for it," said Sam, backing away. "Anyhow, I'm a married man."

Cars came, screaming as usual. "Here's Flick."

Flick and his mob came streaming up the steps.

"What's going on here? Where's the killer?"

Sam stood in front of the doorway, holding his hands out like he was unsnarling traffic. He was shaking. "Walk over this side," he said, "or you'll step on her."

"What are you gibbering about? Step on who?"

Sam flapped his hands and pointed at the floor. Flick and Brown and the others all looked down, then up again. I don't know what got into me. I just couldn't help it. I said, "He found a ladybug and he don't want you to step on it."

Flick got so mad, so quick, he didn't even swear.

We went inside. The medic was working over the boy, who was still unconscious. Flick was demanding, "Well? Well? What's the matter with him?"

"Not a thing I can find out, not without a fluoroscope and some blood tests. Shock, maybe."

"Shot?" gasped Daniels.

"Definitely not," said the M.O.

Flick said, very, very quietly, "Sam told me over the phone that he had shot the boy. What about this, Delehanty? Can you talk sense, or is Sam contagious?"

I told him what we had seen from the side of the house. I told him that we couldn't be sure who it was that rang the bell, but that we saw whoever it was raise a knife to strike, and then Sam fired, and then we ran up and found the kid lying at the bottom of the steps. We heard a knife fall.

"Did you hear him fall down the steps?"

"No," said Sam.

"Shut up, you," said Flick, not looking at him. "Well, Delehanty?"

"I don't think so," I said, thinking hard. "It all happened so fast."

"It was a girl."

"What was a girl? Who said that?"

Daniels shuffled forward. "I answered the door. A girl was there. She had a knife. A long one, pointed. I think it was double-edged."

"Here it is," said Sam brightly.

Flick raised his eyes to heaven,

moved his lips silently, and took the knife.

"That's it," said Daniels. "Then there was a gunshot, and she screamed and fell."

"She did, huh? Where is she?"

"I—I don't know," said Daniels in puzzlement.

"She's still there," said Sam smugly. I thought, oh-oh. This is it.

"Thank you, Sam," said Flick icily. "Would you be good enough to point her out to me?"

Sam nodded. "There. Right there," and he pointed.

"See her, lying there in the doorway," I piped up.

Flick looked at Sam, and he looked at me. "Are you guys trying to—*uk!*" His eyes bulged, and his jaw went slack.

Everyone in the room froze. There, in plain sight on the porch, lay the body of a girl. She was quite a pretty girl, small and dark. She had a bullet hole on each side of her neck, a little one here and a great big one over here.

VII

Told by the Author

THEODORE STURGEON

I DON'T much care for the way this story's going.

You want to write a story, see, and you sit down in front of the mill, wait until that certain feeling comes to you, hold off a second longer just to be quite sure that you know exactly what you want to do, take a deep breath, and get up and make a pot of coffee.

This sort of thing is likely to go for days, until you are out of coffee and can't get more until you can pay for same, which you can do by writing a story and selling it; or until you get tired of messing around and sit down and write a yarn purely by means of knowing how to do it and applying the knowledge.

But this story's different. It's coming out as if it were being dictated to me, and I'm not used to that. It's a haywire sort of yarn; I have no excuses for it, and can think of no reasons for such a plot having unfolded itself to me. It isn't that I can't finish it up; far from it—all the plot factors tie themselves neatly together at the end, and this with no effort on my part at all.

This can be demonstrated; it's the last chapter that bothers me. You see, I didn't write it. Either someone's playing a practical joke on me, or— No. I prefer to believe someone's playing a practical joke on me.

Otherwise, this thing is just too horrible.

But about that demonstration: here's what happened:

* * *

Flick never quite recovered from the shock of seeing that sudden corpse. The careful services of the doctor were not required to show that the young lady was dead, and

Flick recovered himself enough to start asking questions.

It was Daniels who belatedly identified her as the nurse he had seen at the hospital the day Mrs. Stoye killed herself. The nurse's name was Lucille Holder. She had come from England as a girl; she had a flawless record abroad and in this country. The head doctor told the police, on later investigation, that he had always been amazed at the tremendous amount of work Miss Holder could turn out, and had felt that inevitably some sort of a breakdown must come. She went all to pieces on Mrs. Stoye's death, and he sent her on an immediate vacation.

Her movements were not difficult to trace, after she left the administrative office, where she ascertained Mr. Daniels' address. She went first to his house, and the only conclusion the police could come to was that she had done so on purpose to kill him. But he was not there: he, it seems, had been trying to find her at the hospital at the time! So she left. The following night she went out to Stoye's, rang the bell, and killed him.

Ronnie followed her, apparently filled with the same unaccountable impulse, and was late. Miss Holder went then to Daniel's house and tried to kill him, but was shot by the policeman, just as Ronnie, late again, arrived.

Ronnie lay in a coma for eight weeks. The diagnosis was brain fever, which served as well as anything else. He remembered little, and that confused. He did, however, vouch for the nurse's visit to his home the night of Mrs. Stoye's death. He could not explain why he had kept it a secret from his father, nor why he had had the impulse to kill Mr. Stoye (he admitted this impulse freely and without any horror), nor how he had happened to think of finding Stoye's address through the information operator at the telephone company.

He simply said that he wanted to get it without asking any traceable questions. He also admitted that when he found that Mr. Stoye had already been killed, he felt that he must secure another weapon and go and kill his father. He says he remembers thinking of it without any emotion whatsoever at the time, though he was appalled at the thought after he came out of the coma.

"It's all like a story I read a long time ago," he said. "I don't remember doing these things at all; I remember seeing them done."

When the policeman shot Miss Holder, Ronnie felt nothing; the lights went out, and he knew nothing until eight weeks later.

These things remained unexplained to the participants:

Mrs. Stoye's disappearing body. The witnesses were the two Daniels and Miss Holder. Miss Holder could not report it; Ronnie did not

remember it; Mr. Daniels kept his own counsel.

Lucille Holder's disappearing body. Daniels said nothing about this either, and for the rest of his life tried to forget it. The members of the homicide detail and the two prowl-car men tried to forget it, too. It was not entered in the records of the case. It seemed to have no bearing, and all concerned were happy to erase it as much as possible. If they spoke of it at all, it was in terms of mass hypnosis—which was reasonably accurate, at that. . . .

Lucille Holder's motive in killing Mr. Stoye and in trying to kill Mr. Daniels. This could only be guessed at; it was simple to put it down to the result of a nervous breakdown after overwork.

Mrs. Stoye's suicide. This, too, was attributed to a mounting mental depression and was forgotten as quickly as possible.

And two other items must be mentioned. The radio patrolman Sam was called on the carpet by Detective Lieutenant Flick for inefficiency in letting the boy Ronnie go. He was not punished, oddly enough. He barely mentioned the corpse of Lucille Holder, and that there were witnesses to the fact that *apparently* the lieutenant had not seen it, though he had stepped right over it on the way into Daniels' house. Flick swore that he was being framed, but let Sam alone thereafter.

The other item has to do with Miss Jennie Beaufort, an operator in the Information Office of the telephone company. Miss Beaufort won a prize on a radio quiz—a car, a plane, two stoves, a fur coat, a diamond ring, a set of SwingFree Shoulder pads, and a 38-day South American cruise. She quit her job the following day, took the cruise, enjoyed it mightily, learned on her return that income tax was due on the valuation of all her prizes, sold enough to pay the tax, and was so frightened at the money it took that she went back to work at her old job.

* * *

So, you see, these tangled deaths, these mad actions, were all explained, forgotten, rationalized—made to fit familiar patterns, as were Charles Fort's strange lights and shapes in the night, as were the Flying Discs, the disappearance of Lord Bathhurst, the teleportation of Kaspar Hauser, and the disappearance of the crew of the *Mary Celeste*.

I leave it to the reader to explain the following chapter. I found it by and in my typewriter yesterday afternoon (I'd been writing this story all the previous night). Physically, it was the most extraordinary looking manuscript I have ever seen.

In the first place the paper bails had apparently been released most of the time, and letters ran into each other and lines crossed and re-

crossed each other with wild abandon. In the second place there were very few capital letters; I was reminded of Don Marquis's heroic archy the cockroach, who used to write long effusions while Mr. Marquis was asleep, by jumping from one key to the other.

But archy was not heavy enough to operate the shift key, and so he eschewed the upper-case characters. In the third place, the spelling was indescribable. It was a mixture of phonetics and something like Speed-writing, or ABC shorthand. It begins this way:

> i mm a thngg wch livz n fantsy whr tru fantsy z fond n th mynz v mn.

I couldn't possibly inflict it all on you in its original form. It took me the better part of two hours just to get the pages in order—they weren't numbered, of course.

After I plowed through it myself, I undertook a free translation. I have rewritten it twice since, finding more rhythm, more fluidity, each time, as I become familiar with the extraordinary idiom in which it was written. I think that as it now stands it closely follows the intent and mood of the original. The punctuation is entirely mine; I regard punctuation as inflection in print, and have treated this accordingly, as if it were read aloud.

I must say this: there are three other people who could conceivably have had access to this machine while I was asleep. They are Jeff and Les and Mary.

I know for a fact that Jeff, who is an artist, was busy the entire time with a non-objective painting of unusual vividness and detail; I know how he works, and I know what the picture looked like when I quit writing for the night, and what it looked like when I woke up, and believe me, he must have been painting like mad the entire time—he and no one else.

As for Les, he works in the advertising department of a book publisher and obviously has not the literary command indicated by this manuscript.

And Mary—I am lucky enough to be able to say that Mary is very fond of me, and would be the last person in the world to present me with such a nasty jolt as is innate in this final chapter. Here it is; and please forgive me for this lengthy but necessary introduction to it, and for my intrusion; this sort of thing is strictly against the rules.

VIII

"?"

I AM a Thing which lives in fantasy, where true fantasy lives in the minds of men.

What fumbling is this, what clumsiness, what pain. . . . I who never was a weight, who never turned, coerced, nor pressed a per-

son, never ordered, never forced —I who live with laughter, die with weeping, rise and hope and cheer with man's achievements, yet with failure and despair go numb and cold and silent and unnoticeable— what have I to do with agony?

Know me, mankind, know me now and let me be.

Know the worst. I feed on you. I eat and breathe no substance but a precious ether. No, not souls (but where a soul is strong and clean I live my best). I take this guarded essence where I can, and thrive on it; and when I choose a host I am imprisoned, for I may not leave him while he lives, and when he dies I must locate another to inhabit. And I have . . . powers.

But know this too: The thing that I take is the essence of joy— and in joy is created an excess of that which I need. I drink in your reservoir, yes; but when there is drought and the level is low, and your needs are increased, and the water turns bitter with flavors of worry, and anger, and fear, then I shrink and I soften, and lose all my hunger; and then if you grieve, if your spirit is broken, if you should forget all the pleasure and glory and wonder of being a man—then I die. . . .

Such a death is not death as you know it. It is more a waiting unmoving within a soul's winter, to wake with the spring of the heart. But where people grieve over years, or let fear share their souls with me, then I must wait for the walls of my prison to crumble.

Then, after the death of my host I go drifting, seeking another. That is my Search, and in it, for me, is the ultimate cold. No human can know such a thing, for death, for a human, is kinder.

I am and I am not a parasite. I feed on your substance; yet what living thing in the world does not feed on the substance of others? And I take only excess—take only that which you radiate gaily when you feel joy.

When you feel otherwise, then I must wait, or must sleep, or must die. Where is the evil in being a parasite, when I take only a product which you never need? I demand only sustenance; that is the right of all living things. I ask in addition a thing which is simple enough—I ask to be left to myself, to encyst or to flower or sleep or be joyful, without any devilish probing.

I do not know how old I am; I do not know if there are others like me. I do not know how many hosts I have inhabited, or whether I was born or hatched, or whether, like a human, I must one day truly die. I shall, no doubt; I am alive, and nothing lives forever. I know my years are thousands, and my hosts have been in scores of hundreds. I have no interest in statistics.

Yet you must know me. . . . I think my origins were like a plant's —an accidental seed of sensuality

perhaps. My infancy was passed in dreams, in sightless stirrings when the stimulation merited, and blacknesses between. I think that when my hosts passed on, my knotted insubstantial cyst just drifted like a petal on a roiling stream, it bumped and nuzzled and at last slipped in when chance presented hosts which qualified.

To qualify, in those uncaring phases, men had but to show an openness and nothing more. And when I gained experience and consciousness increased, and realization came to me, and I was grown and had ability to choose, I gained as well the power of rejection.

And after that I was no longer bound to sickly children, open to me through their thirst for colors, senses, odors, vivid to them through unsaid convictions that the end was near. I became increasingly meticulous in choosing; I became an expert in detecting signs of whimsy-richness in its earliest potential. I have powers. . . .

You have powers too, you human ones. You can change the color of a life by vicious striking at a stranger-child. You can give away a thing you treasure, making memories which later might compose a symphony. You can do a thousand thousand things you never do; you never try; there is no reason to depart from paths you have established. When, however, circumstances force you into it, you do the "superhuman."

Once my host was Annabelle, a woman on a farm. (She loved the birds!) In a blizzard she was lost; she was old and had a crippled knee, and could not find the road, and could not last the night. She stumbled on a post which stood erect and lonesome on the prairie, and, without a conscious thought of bravery, or what mankind might say to her, she put a hand upon the weathered wood, and in the blowing snow and bitter cold, she walked around the post—around, around, in spite of age and pain and growing numbness, walked around the post until the sun came up in blowing grey, then growing cold.

They found her and they saved her, when in truth she saved herself. There was about her such a cloud of pure achievement, such a joy at having cheated wind and cold! (I fed that day; I still possess the energies she radiated!) . . . I have powers; all have powers, when we're forced to use them. I have powers, you have too, which you have never cataloged.

I have powers—now I use them!

I have no host. Such bitterness and agony as I have just experienced I never want again. My Search, this time, will be a thorough one and for it, now, I make my sacrifice. I am unknown; but with this script, these purposely hypnotic words, *I shall be known!* I sacrifice my privacy, my yearning for the pleasant weightless dark

where I have dwelt. I challenge mankind's probing, for, through these bright words and burnished continuities, I shall locate a host who will defend me!

I had a man—he had me, possibly—who would have fought for me. And after him I dwelt within a woman's mind—the richest and most magical of all. The man was one of those who, on maturing, never lost the colorful ability to wonder like a child. And one day, miming, imitating a precise and dainty minuet in joyful incongruity (he danced alone upon the bouncing platform of a truck) a falling girder struck him and he died. I had no warning and no way to make a Search; I flung myself into the mind of one who was nearby in close communion with my dead host's whimsy.

Grace had a mind that was magic throughout. Never in thousands of years have I seen such a shimmering jewel; never in thousands of pages of words found in thousands of languages could such a trove be described. All that she saw was transmuted in sibilant subleties; all that she heard was in breath-taking colors and shapes. What she touched, what she said, what she saw, what she felt, what she thought—these were all blended in joy.

She was the pinnacle; she was the source of the heady exuberant food which in flavor eclipsed my most radiant memories. She, like the blizzard of Annabelle—she was the suitable circumstance, bringing about the release of the powers I held all untried.

I stirred in her mind. I found I could reach out and touch certain sources of hunger—sights that she never had seen and sensations she never had turned to, things which should surely delight such a sensitive soul.

I found to my joy that with care I controlled them, the hungers for things I remembered in hosts less responsive. I practiced this skill as she broadened her life, and I led her to music and poems and thoughts which she never, perhaps, could have found by herself. She had every reason for happiness with all these riches, and I—oh, I gloried in bringing things to her, as many a gifted composer has brought a new music to some virtuoso.

But her husband was Stoye.

Stoye was a devil. He hated me for what I was, before he could define it. His mind was quite as rich as hers, but something curbed it. Growing with her was impossible; he sensed with rare perception that a Thing had come to her, and since that Thing was not of him, he hated it. It mattered not to him that she was better for it. Brutally he turned away from sharing what I brought into his home.

And she—I could not take her from him. How I tried! Poor treasure-trove, she was at last a battle-

ground between that questing creature and myself. He hounded me through her, and I struck back by taking her to rare enchantments in which he could not share.

He was the first—the very first—of all the humans I have known, to recognize me and to seek me out. This recognition was intolerable; all my life I have avoided it, and lived in war and secret joyfulness. He goaded me until I evidenced myself; I never realized I could make a human speak, but Grace spoke for me when she said that "It wants only to be let alone."

She might as well have died, right then and there, for all the sustenance I got from her therefore. I knew that she would kill herself; between us, her and me, there was a madness caught from Stoye.

Stoye put her, numb and docile, in the hospital. I started to encyst, for Grace's well was dry to me. I found a likely subject in the nurse, who seemed as sensitive as Grace (but lacked that fine capacity for whimsy) and I poised myself to make the change. While waiting, then, I thought of Stoye—and realized that, with Grace's death, he would not rest until he found me and destroyed me, either by attacking all my hosts, or if he learned the way of it, by closing minds against me by his printed propaganda. He had to be destroyed.

Grace killed herself; her one blind foolishness, her love for Stoye, and all her stupid thoughts that she had lost it, made her do it. I might have stopped her; but why should I, when I needed a release from all her bitterness? Believe me, it was just as strong as all her joys had been . . . before she leaped she tried to warn him, tried to send some crazy message to him through a youngster standing down below.

My connection with her was not close just then; I am not sure; she still was set on death as an escape but wished her husband to be watchful and protect himself. And then she leaped.

And then it came—that awful amputation.

I could not know that Ronnie was so strong a host, potentially—that so well suited to me was he that, as I flashed upward to the nurse, to take possession, I was torn apart!

I HAVE no substance; yet I am an entity, with limits and with boundaries. These were ruptured; while my greater part found room within the nurse's mind, a fragment nestled into Ronnie's.

At first I felt a transcendental pain and dizziness; and then I did the things I could to be protected. I hid the crumpled body with a forced hypnotic wave (this is no subtle mystery; a thousand men can do it) to keep the wave of terror all confused with curiosity, for terror undiluted quite inhibits my possession of a host.

I settled into Lucille Holder's

mind and tested the controls which Stoye had forced me to develop. Lucille was far less strong than Grace had been, and forcing her was easy. I was wounded, I was maddened, and at last I drank, with purpose and a new dark joy, the thing called hate.

Stoye had to die. The man called Daniels, Ronnie's father, saw Grace leap and was a witness. Possibly he might become too curious, with his son possessed, and be another probing devil. He must die. Ronnie had a part of me, and I did not think he could release it while he lived. So he must die.

To test my new controls, I sent the nurse at first to do the minor task. The elder Daniels was not there; and when I found myself confronted with that other part of me, I nearly died of yearning. And I realized, in that closeness, that the boy could be controlled as well, and that he could destroy his father quite at my convenience, while Lucille could kill him later. Satisfied, I went away.

I SPENT that night and all next day securing my controls, and practicing. And late the night that followed, I killed Stoye, and two strange things happened.

One was when Stoye died; I felt a wave of powerful protectiveness about him as he fled his body, and I sensed again the fullest, richest magic that was Grace. I was terrified of it; I had never known before that humans could outlive their carcasses . . .

The other thing was the arrival of Ronnie, apparently moved by the part of me carried within him. Yet since he possessed but a fragment, his effort was late and his motive was weak, and I feared that he might make a botch of the killing of Daniels. I therefore sent Lucille to do it; Ronnie, again weak and tardy, followed my orders.

The gunshot, the bullet which shattered the neck of the nurse, were quite unexpected. I was flung unprepared into cold, in my nakedness, cold indescribable, cold beyond bearing. Yet I was glad; for the fraction of me that was Ronnie's came streaming toward me as I was exploded away from the nurse. The wrench it gave Ronnie must have been dreadful; when I settle into a host all my roots go down deep.

I hid Lucille's body and searched all the minds in the house for a suitable host. Ronnie was perfect, unconscious and closed. Daniels was fretful; I can't abide fear. I fought back the cold, drew inward, contracted, and formed, at long last, a new cyst. I let Lucille's body be seen, and ignoring the others—their whimsy was flat as their oversized feet—I withdrew.

And I have been thinking.

Some things were important that now cannot matter. I am different because of the searchings of Stoye—I blame him for all that has hap-

pened, and that is a thing which can no longer matter.

I know how to hate now, and how to make murder; the taste of these things is still bitter, but so is the taste of good stout when first taken, and stout has a taste worth acquiring. Like Grace I still have all my earlier qualities—the sun on a mountain or watching the curve of the wing of a gull (through a host) certainly has all the zest for me that it has ever had. Now I have more, though; and that is a thing which can matter very much indeed.

I have been selfish. It never occurred to me, back in the days of the man who did minuets joyfully, that I might do something *for* him whom I choose as a host. Grace taught me that, purely by feeding me richly through her experiences, purely by being a subject for my schooled suggestions. There may have been many who carried me, who were susceptible to my control.

I could not know without trying, and I never tried this command until Grace took me in. And since then I hunger, I thirst for the richness and beauty and shifting and changing of colors and sounds which she brought me, and never again will rest and be fed and be happy to have just enough to sustain me.

I drift, now, encysted, but testing my powers when never before had I thought of them. I find I am mobile; also, to certain degrees, I can move things—this writing machine, for example, though it is slow and laborious. I find I can whisper to humans and fit some strange thoughts and ideas to each other.

I have looked for a host for a weary, cold while, and my energies seem to be dwindling. I still have enough, though, to search for a time, and soon now I'll have what I need.

I'll find, soon, a person, a man or a woman, or even a sensitive child. This one will be mine and I'll lead him to wonders of sense and of music and heady adventure. I think I am learning to savor the tartness of terror, the bloody salt flavor of killing with purpose. My host will exist in a series of colorful pageants and move in a world of emotional riches, all of my carefullest choosing.

And for this I sacrifice that which I guarded—my passion for quiet and secret enjoyments. I say to you, Know me! Suspect me! for by your suspicion you open yourself to my coming. And when some great mural is painted by someone who never did passable work in his life before that, suspect me. And when in a prison some cringing psychotic says, over and over, "A voice said to do it!" suspect me."

Whenever you walk in the street and feel a strange spasm of nausea, suspect me indeed; for then I am

injured, and what you have seen is a part-host like Ronnie; and know that that person must die—and can kill if I will it.

I am so cold. . . .

I write this because in my search for a host who is perfect, I find that one segment of humans is almost entirely open. These are the readers and tellers of tales of the dark and of terror and madness. The one who has written these chapters would serve as a host—but I fear he would turn on me, feed on my memories, use me for piddling profit in plying his trade.

Besides, he's a bit superficial for one of my tastes. I know his intentions, however, and what he will do with this script. I know he is frightened because of the way this long tale has unfolded, I know, too, that nothing will keep him from seeing it printed.

When it is read, though, by thousands of like-minded people all over the world, and he hears of the music and murder created by someone who fell to me only through reading it, then he will curse and will wish he were dead, and wish he had torn this to pieces.

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THE NAME OF THE GAME IS TAPE

The best part of the caper was, nobody would ever know. Nobody, that is, but a very curious cop with an idea.

by

DAN J. MARLOWE

BROAD-SHOULDERED Carl Robey, detective sergeant of the Midland police force, shifted position uneasily on the roll of canvas in the storage room of the huge, semi-darkened supermarket.

"This is crazy!" he rasped to his detective partner, James Thompson. "Three nights you've had me in here for nothing now. This stakeout is a joke. Wherever you're getting your information from, it's all wet."

Thompson, younger and slimmer, frowned in the darkness.

"Hold on a little longer, Carl," he said softly. "I know I'm right about this. I have everything but the date. They'll be along."

Robey's snort was distinctly audible. "You won't get me in here another night, Jimmy," he warned. "This is slower going than sitting in your apartment watching you add sound on sound to a pre-recorded tape. You know I don't have the patience—" He broke off abruptly as a whirring noise made itself heard above the sound of his voice. He surged up to his knees, his big

hand dropping on his partner's shoulder and tightening.

"Diamond cutter on glass," he breathed. "You were right, Jimmy. They're coming through the side window. I'll cover the front." Moving with a speed surprising in a man of his bulk, he disappeared into the shadow of the store aisles, a bulldog flashlight in his left hand and a .38 police special held firmly in his right.

Thompson remained flat on the canvas, alert for the revealing tinkle of the removed square of glass. It was followed by the rasp of the catch being slipped off, and the squeak of the opening window. A series of grunts indicated the progress of the first man through it, and when he heard the third solid thump of heels hitting the floor, Thompson rose and moved catfootedly to a more advantageous position.

"Let's get to the safe," a hoarse voice whispered.

The area of the room under the opened window was bathed suddenly in the glare of Carl Robey's flashlight.

"Don't move!" the big man snapped. Thompson flicked on his own light. Caught in the pinpoint crossfire of the flashlight beams, three white faces stared at the dark figures behind the dazzling brightness. "Turn around," Robey ordered. The men complied slowly. "Hands over your heads and palms flat against the wall," he continued. In the glare of the flashlights half a dozen hands crept up the wall. "Okay, Jimmy. Cuff them. I'll call the desk."

"Who talked?" the tallest of the men facing the wall cried out passionately. "I'll kill the— Who talked?"

"You talked, Jeff," Thompson told him, deftly slipping three pairs of wrists into the three sets of handcuffs he had brought along. "All right, Carl. Make your call."

WHEN the last of the paper work had been completed and the prisoners processed and the lieutenant's congratulations duly savored, Carl Robey cornered his partner in the station-house locker room.

"All right," the gray-haired man said grimly. "Give. Before I go out of my feeble mind trying to figure it out. How did you *know* they were planning to knock that particular safe over? And why *three* sets of handcuffs, instead of two or four?"

Thompson smiled as he lit a cigarette.

"It was easy, given the original hunch," he said. "You remember that neither of us was happy about Jeff settling down in our precinct after the parole board turned him loose the last time, since we both had him figured for a real wrongo. I kept checking with his parole officer, and a month ago he told me he'd had unconfirmed rumors of Jeff's cutting corners on his parole regulations, hanging out in taverns

in wrong company, that sort of thing.

"I knew he was up to something, so I went by his rooming house one day and coaxed his landlord into giving me a look at his room. It was about what you'd expect, except that in one corner I saw an expensive-looking hi-fi unit with a quarter inch of dust on it, indicating that it wasn't being used. I knew right then how I was going to find out what Jefferson was up to. I spent ten minutes hooking up the speaker in the hi-fi so it was operating as a microphone, and then I ran a wire—"

"Wait a minute!" Carl Robey protested. "Wait a *minute!* You changed a *speaker* into a *microphone?* What kind of talk is that?"

"All speakers are microphones, properly converted," Thompson replied. "Usually you need an amplifier, because there's a loss of power, but it's no great trick. Just take the wire leading—"

"Spare me the lesson in electronics," Carl Robey said gloomily. "You know I never made it out of the sixth grade."

Thompson smiled. "All I did was run a wire from the converted speaker down to the basement, then brought in my voice-actuated portable tape recorder and connected it up in a closet to which the landlord gave me the key. Every morning I'd run in and put on a fresh reel of tape and take off the full one. I've got a stack of tapes at home in which Jeff outlined the entire job.

"I knew everything about it except the date, although I knew it was going to be this weekend. I think Jeff didn't tell even his partners when he planned to move in to prevent exactly what happened."

"So if you knew all this, why'd you have me losing sleep?" Robey demanded indignantly. "We could've scooped 'em in their room and wrapped 'em up."

Thompson shook his head.

"Most courts won't accept that kind of evidence," he explained. "Now, anyway, although I believe they'll come to it. They should, since they're taking away so many of the lawman's tools." He smiled at Robey. "Simple, wasn't it?"

"Not for me," his partner said emphatically. "The Wizard of Oz has nothing on you, boy." A slow grin spread over his broad features. "Crime prevention—that's the name of the game!"

"This time the name of the game was tape," Thompson said.

"Okay, okay," Robey said. "You know what worries me? After this, what do we do for an encore the next time the lieutenant lines us up on a job?"

"When we need it, I'll think of something," Thompson said.

"I wouldn't bet against it, partner," Robey said.

Together they went out into what was left of the night.

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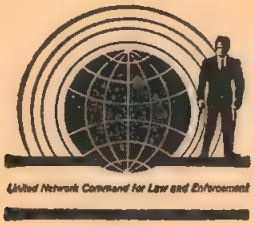

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The Battered Bride

by NORMAN HUNT

Sometimes a little violence can do a lot of good. And—when mere violence isn't enough . . .

GILMAN WALKED down the street as if he were on honest business. At a glassed-in phone booth near the corner he paused, then walked in and dialled swiftly.

"Fredrics? I'm all set."

The man on the other end of the line sounded anxious. "That's definite, I suppose? You are going through with it?"

"Definitely."

"It's pretty dangerous, you know," Jim Fredrics told him. "Don't let yourself get seen—except by one person."

Gilman hung up and left the booth. He walked past the end of town to the spot where he had parked, drove to a white-painted, three-story house half a mile away.

He got out and walked along a flagstone path, glancing at a badminton court close to him and at

a swimming pool. He picked up a sunflower and squeezed its stem till the juice was spread over his palm.

After he touched the bulge in his side pocket, he knocked at the door.

His knock was answered by a blonde in a flower-patterned bathrobe and white mules. She could still have passed for eighteen, Gilman thought, married and all; and he wished his heart didn't beat faster at sight of her.

"Get dressed, Renee," he snapped. "You're coming with me."

"Why—what is it, Tom? My husb—"

"He's never home till five o'clock and for now you're with me," Gilman said, reaching in his pocket and showing the ugly black snout of a Colt Cobra. "Get dressed."

"I never thought you'd do a thing like this, Tom. You always seemed like not a bad guy."

She dressed quickly, tearing a stocking in the process. With sweat-soaked fingers she eased herself into spotted white slacks, and finally fumbled a white shirt and jacket onto herself.

Gilman had been glancing around at the expensive furniture. A smile tugged at his lips. "You're doing all right, even if your husband *is* out of the rackets," he said.

"My husband will never again hang around with people he knows are the dregs of the—"

Gilman raised the Colt Cobra as if to smash it across Renee's mouth, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Too damn good-hearted, that was his trouble, he told himself grimly.

Renee walked first, gesturing idly with the house keys. Gilman told her to put them away. Nobody saw him with her on the way to the car. He drove swiftly, smelling grass that bent to the wind on both sides of him.

"I used to like you, Tom," Renee said softly as Gilman stopped the car in a grove of trees. "If you'd gotten out of the rackets first—"

"Forget it," he growled, and kept from saying that he had always liked her and still did, in a way.

He turned to her as she sat framed against scenery of gray rock cliff shining in the sun. "Here's where I go to work on you," he said.

The girl fell back in terror against the door. As he raised a fist she suddenly opened the door, nearly dropping against it. She fell out of the car at last, losing her balance completely. As Gilman started to leave by the opened door, she reached up hurriedly and slammed it shut, hoping for precious seconds to get her faculties together.

Gilman backed up the car and

turned it around so that he was facing her. Wide-eyed, the girl turned to run. Gilman followed her in the car, a cat playing with a mouse. The girl glanced back over a shoulder to see that the car was lumbering along after her.

She swerved, then, finally running toward the gray-faced cliff that offered her the one chance of safety. Gilman gunned the car.

For a time, scrambling over the rocks with the animal speed that fear had given her, she seemed to have actually outdistanced him. It was less her lack of speed than a hidden, moss-covered rock that made her fall heavily, twisting hard as she landed, so that the rock, which could have crushed her chest cavity, glanced off her ribs.

She cried out then, but miraculously regained her feet, stumbling drunkenly toward the rock face, so near and yet so terribly far.

It was close, but Renee reached the cliff. Gilman cursed loudly, then drew out the Colt Cobra. He fired once, and watched his bullet chip a piece of gray rock out of the cliff.

Renee, throwing fear-filled glances back of her, scrambled up the cliff toward a place where a huge rock lay on a wide ledge. The rock would give cover.

She stiffened when Gilman fired again, then fell. Gilman didn't go up to the cliff after her, but drove away from the scene as quickly as he could.

There was a phone booth in the first gas station he reached, and Gilman called his pal Jim Fredrics from there.

"I took care of Renee," he said. "I fired over her head twice when I'd got her away from the house, and she was smart enough to play possum. I guess she'll not get home for a few more hours at least. What happened at the other end?"

"You mean about the boys?" Fredrics asked. "They did it. Got to the house at five o'clock, just when Renee's husband got home, and chopped him to pieces for thinking he could get out of the rackets. One thing the boss always hates, and that's a quitter."

"I know," Gilman said, thinking of Renee, "or else I might have been the first one to—well, never mind. I suppose the guy is dead."

"You suppose exactly right," Fredrics told him. "All according to plan. And if you hadn't gotten Renee out of the house in time, she'd have been killed for knowing too much about how her husband got it."

"It's almost a shame she'll always think of me as a sore boy friend and not a guy who kept her out of trouble and saved her life."

"I was wondering," Fredrics asked, "what made you do it."

"Well, I've always liked Renee and I still do," Gilman said. "Do you know what's the trouble with me, Jim? I'm too good-natured, that's all."

David McCallum (Illya)

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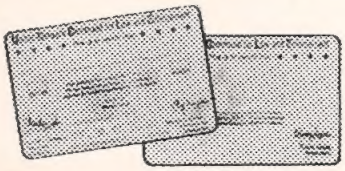

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